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Killer Bees?

Kids love competition, win or lose

JUNE KRONHOLZ



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Movie Mogul in the Classroom, L.A. Teachers Outbid Charters, the Impact of NCLB, Politics and School Finance, Getting Good Teachers in Tough Schools, Education Venture Funding

CONTRIBUTORS: BRUCE FULLER, ROBERT PONDISCIO, KATI HAYCOCK, ERIC HANUSHEK, FREDERICK HESS, THOMAS DEE, BRIAN JACOB, CHRISTOPHER BERRY, GARY RITTER

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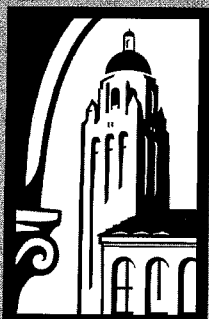
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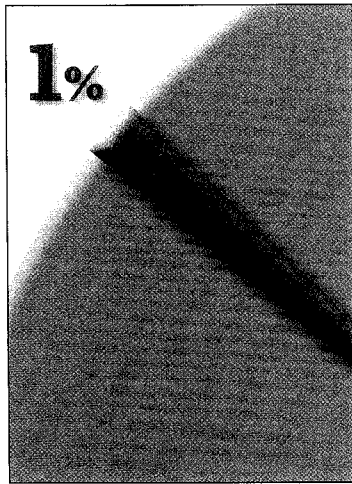
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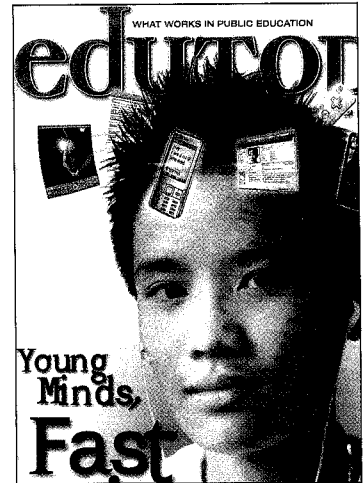
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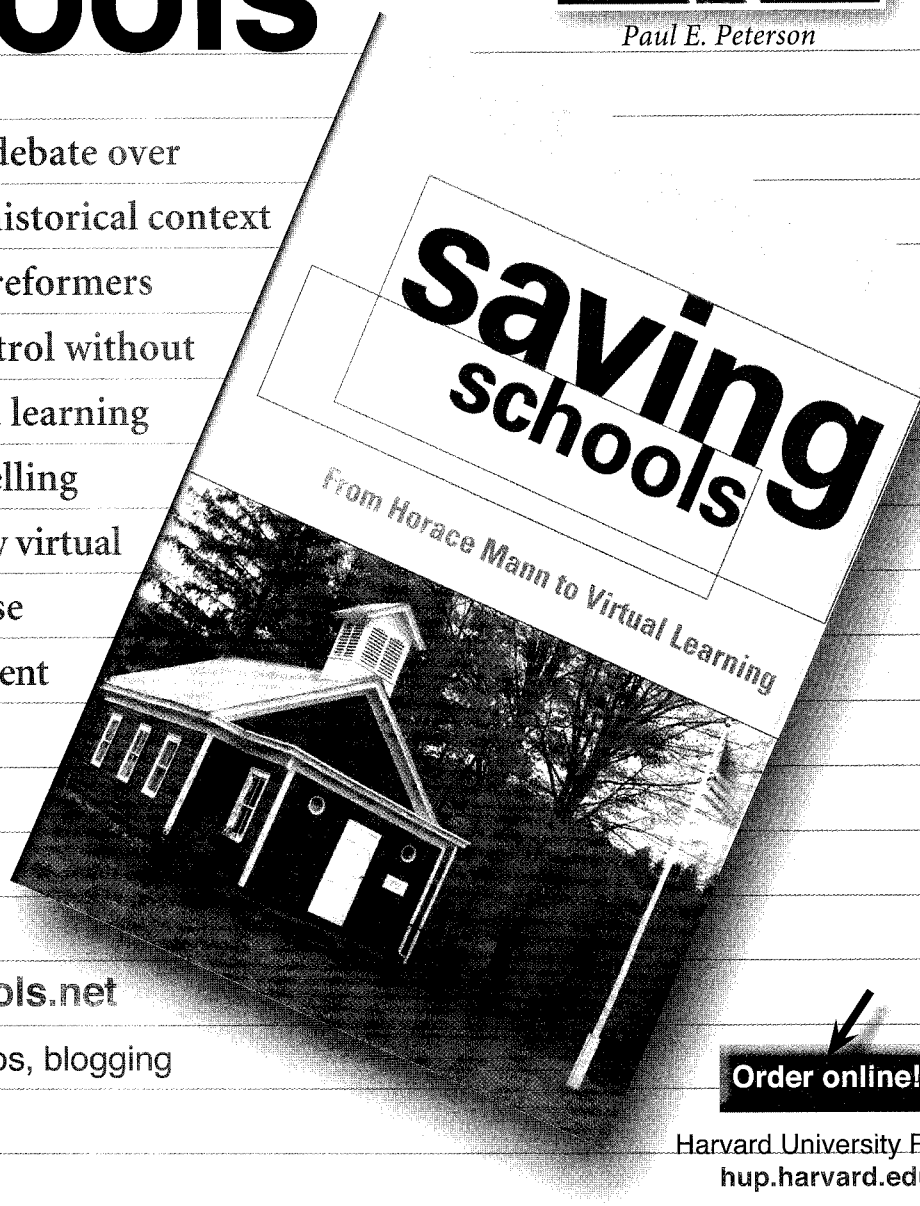
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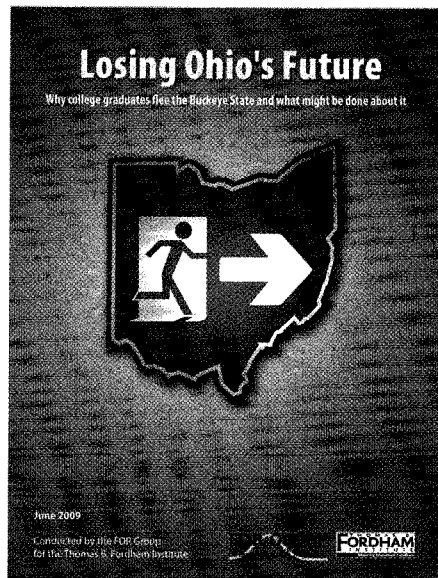
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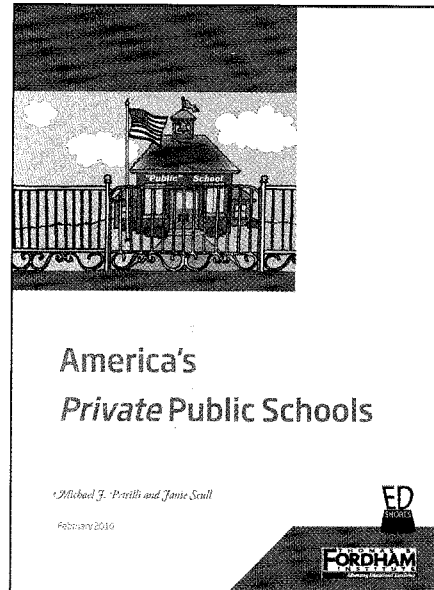
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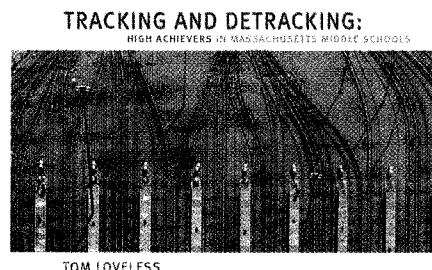
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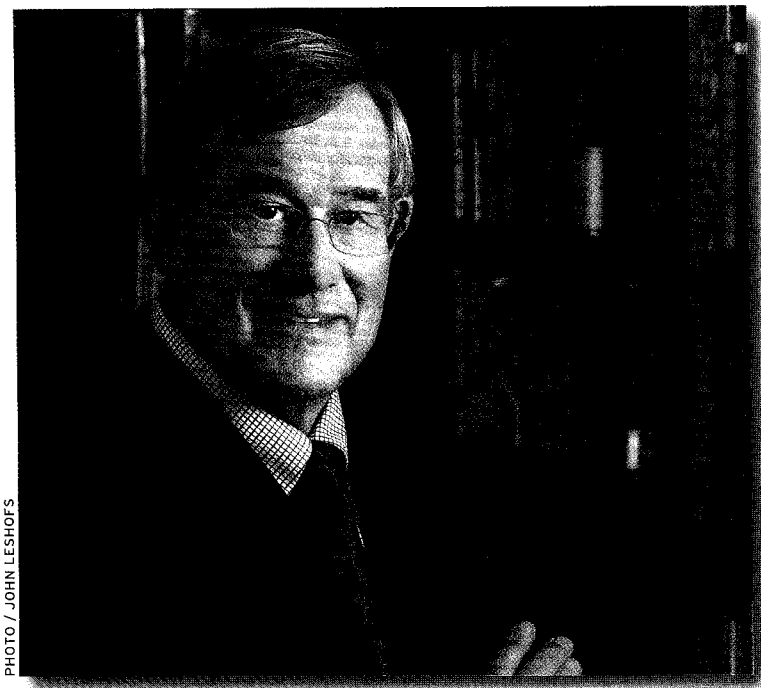


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Competition and Charters Spur Innovation

*School markets are creative,
not static*

“It is in the nature of markets that some succeed, some are middling, and others fail.” That is the static view of the marketplace that induced Diane Ravitch, in her new book, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*, to turn against accountability, charter schools, and school choice.

Economist Joseph Schumpeter saw it another way. In his view, it is in the nature of markets that good producers “creatively” destroy firms of the middling variety, then are eliminated themselves by still better competitors. Few doubt that the public school today is a troubled institution. If school districts were firms operating in the marketplace, most would quickly fall victim to Schumpeter’s law.

Yet Ravitch sees no hope for choice and competition in education, asking us to leave public schools alone apart from articulating voluntary national standards without holding anyone accountable for meeting them. She blames the sad state of affairs on events occurring long after schools had stagnated: a federal law, No Child Left Behind, enacted in 2002; mayoral governance recently instituted in a few cities (see “Palace Revolt in Los Angeles?” page 20); and a small number (4,638) of charter schools that—despite steady growth—still serve less than 3 percent of the nation’s students.

According to a 2009 *Education Next* survey, the public approves steady charter growth. Among African Americans, those favoring charters do so by a four-to-one margin. Even among public school teachers, the percentage favoring charters is greater than the percentage opposed.

A school can have short-term popularity without being good, of course. The best studies of school quality are randomized

experiments, the gold standard in both medical and education research. Stanford’s Caroline Hoxby and Harvard’s Thomas Kane have organized randomized experiments that compare students who win the charter lottery with those who applied but lost. The students lucky enough to win the lottery and be admitted to a charter school subsequently scored higher on math and reading tests than did those who lost the lottery and remained in district schools.

What makes charters so important today is not so much their current success, on average, but their long-term potential to innovate. When RCA sneered at transistor radios, Sony captured the audio market by first putting out tinny pocket transistors for teenagers, then expanded its base with steady technological improvement. In a decade or two, RCA fell victim to Schumpeter’s law.

Educational opportunity is about to be revolutionized by powerful notebook computers, broadband, sophisticated cooperative and competitive game playing over the Internet, curriculum in three dimensions, and the open-source development of curricular materials. If American education remains stagnant, the innovations will spread slowly, if at all. But if the charter world continues to expand, the conditions ripen for competition among charters, districts, and state virtual schools that can be truly transformative. It is “in the nature of markets” that those who make the best use of new technologies will become dominant—to the benefit of us all.

— Paul E. Peterson

MISSION STATEMENT In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* cartakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.

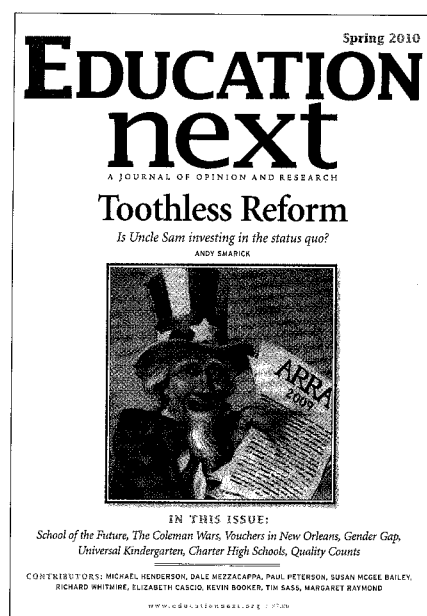
Charter High Schools

For far too long, studies and reports about our nation's high schools have been great at diagnosing problems and highlighting failures. "The Unknown World of Charter High Schools" (*research*, Spring 2010) offers a refreshing change from the typical "gloom and doom" by providing evidence that public charter students in Chicago and Florida have significantly higher graduation and college attendance rates than their peers in traditional public schools.

"The Unknown World of Charter High Schools" is an important research document for two reasons. First, it focuses *not* on student achievement, but more importantly, on educational attainment, specifically, high school graduation and college matriculation. Unfortunately, this "bottom line" research focus is rare. While studies showing growth on standardized tests can prove helpful, schools exist to prepare students to be productive and successful adults. Educational attainment is a much clearer indicator of school quality. A similar bottom-line approach has been central to our success at YES Prep Public Schools, and it is why we require every student to secure acceptance into a four-year college in order to receive a high school diploma.

Second, the methodology used in the study effectively addresses the usual creaming and self-selection arguments that arise with any study demonstrating positive student outcomes in public charter schools. By limiting the high school students in the study to those who attended a charter school for 8th grade, the authors account for the argument that charter students perform at higher levels simply because they are more motivated or come from families in which the parents are more involved in their education.

This outcomes-based focus and thoughtful research design gives the



study the credibility that it needs to serve as an important "proof point" that extends beyond charter high schools. The study serves as an important step in identifying factors in school success. With this knowledge of "the what," we can confidently dig deeper and better understand "the how." Research like this combined with over a decade of practical experience and significant results at high-performing charter public high schools like YES Prep will unlock "the how" to high school reform so we can move past diagnosing the problem and begin implementing real and effective solutions for increasing high school and college completion rates across the country.

CHRIS BARBIC

*Founder and Head of Schools
YES Prep Public Schools*

Coleman's Legacy

Thanks to Paul Peterson for investigating the links between James Coleman's adolescent experiences and his studies of adolescent life and high schools ("A Courageous Look at

the American High School," *features*, Spring 2010). Peterson provides a great service to scholars.

Peterson mentions Coleman's experience at Manual High in Louisville, Kentucky, where he adjusted by becoming a member of the school's football team. Coleman's athleticism had roots deeper than the limited opportunities at his high school, however. His father and grandfather were both football heroes. I recall a comical scene at a graduate-student baseball game. Jim wanted two captains to choose their teams the old-fashioned way: one player at a time. Considering that most graduate students were working from their own adolescent experiences (i.e., their lack of childhood athleticism), a revolt was quickly organized. No one should have to be the last one chosen! All in jest, Jim settled for odd and even birth dates to establish the teams.

Coleman's adult interest in adolescence was not limited to scholarly analysis. Most know of his attempts to develop academically related games that could stir the interest of adolescents. Fewer know of his weekly commitment to tutor a public high school's mathematics team in Chicago.

While his competitive instincts remained with him as a scholar, so did his sense of fair play. As Tom Hoffer and I waded through all the commentaries and critiques of the study of public and private high schools, Jim had strict rules of engagement. Roughly, they were these: Concede well-founded criticisms first. Play on the critics' court (i.e., you can't use sociological arguments to criticize an economist). Protect the junior scholars and give seniors fair hits.

SALLY B. KILGORE

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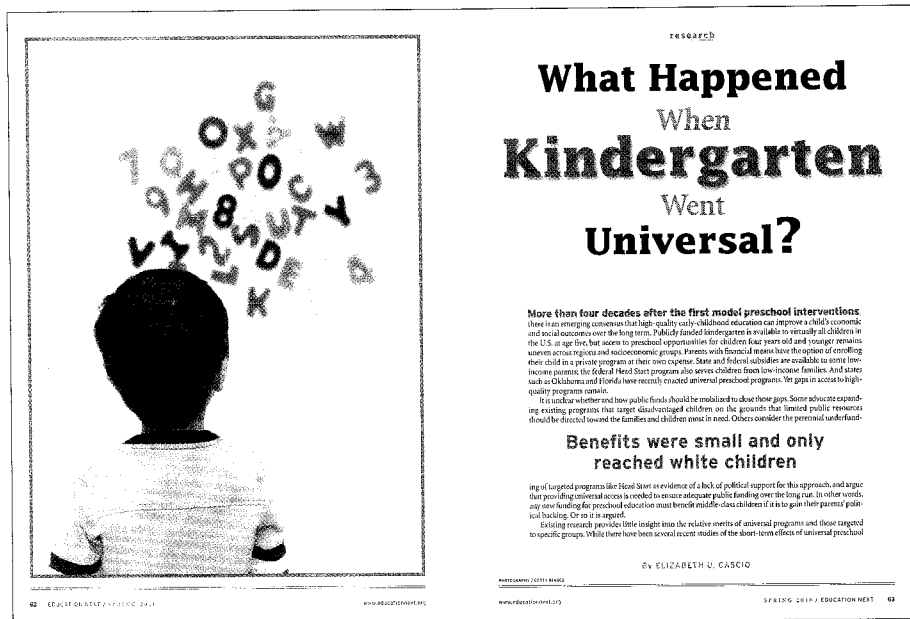
In reading Paul Peterson's thoughtful account of James Coleman's research and its role in history, and of Daniel Patrick Moynihan's reaction, I was reminded that Coleman's big study came out a year after the Moynihan Report (1965). (I had done the research for Moynihan.) At that time, Moynihan's report was in the middle of a firestorm, and I know he found some relief in learning from that study how important the family was.

While I have always thought that the family and neighborhood conditions were a very large factor in achievement differences, I have not thought that the Coleman report itself established the relative contributions of school and family. Poor neighborhoods and low-quality schools are interrelated, and it is very hard to sort it out.

Very much later I stumbled onto a 1972 article by Coleman titled "Policy Research in the Social Sciences" and found that Coleman did not think his study had established such relative contributions. He said that "The plan of the analysis was not appropriate for study of the relative effects of background and school variables, but it was correct for study of relative weights of different school variables." One wonders how many people heard this from him.

As the father of the concept of "social capital," Coleman would be pleased to know how far that concept has come, and that it has been applied in the monumental longitudinal study by a team led by Anthony Bryk (*Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago*, 2010). The study established the strong relationship between the success of school improvement efforts and the strength of social capital in the neighborhoods where the schools were located. Our debt to Coleman is huge, as a pioneer on many important fronts.

PAUL E. BARTON
Education writer
and consultant



Universal Pre-K

Elizabeth Cascio ("What Happened When Kindergarten Went Universal," *research*, Spring 2010) has estimated the effects of universal kindergarten to inform the debate about universal pre-K. She claims existing research provides little insight into the relative merits of universal programs and those targeted to specific groups.

As the father
of the concept of
"social capital,"
Coleman would
be pleased
to know how far
that concept
has come.

While Cascio's results are not fully consistent with other studies, the estimated one-fifth drop in incarceration for whites is intriguing. Ultimately, her effort is unsatisfying because her methods and data provide a weak basis for conclusions, and there is far more relevant information on the long-term effects than she acknowledges.

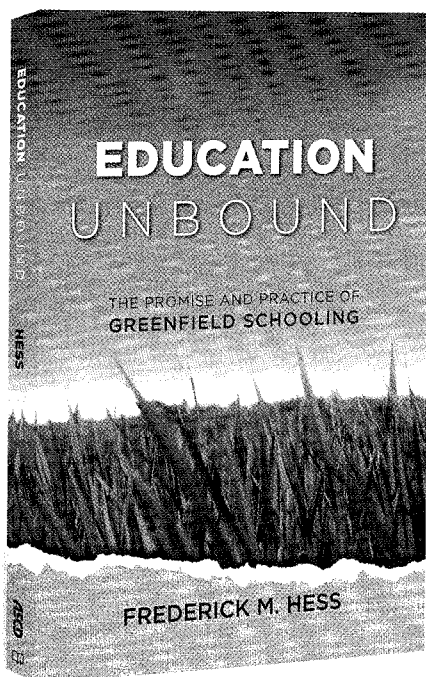
Too often the results of complex models such as Cascio's owe more to the assumptions and idiosyncrasies of the way data are selected and coded than to reality. Despite the model's complexity, there is too much that cannot be adequately taken into account: for example, the potential for schools to use the resources freed by state support for kindergarten to fund other services or reduce class sizes for older children; the effects of large, sudden increases in kindergarten enrollments on quality; large increases and decreases in cohort size over the time period studied; and immigration patterns over time. Among other problems, Cascio's speculations about Head Start fail to consider the impacts on children who begin Head Start a

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Frederick M. Hess is director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute. A nationally recognized author and commentator on schooling, his books include *Educational Entrepreneurship*, *Common Sense School Reform*, and *Spinning Wheels*.



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year earlier as kindergarten replaced Head Start for those who were age five.

Cascio seems unaware of substantial evidence on the longer-term effects of preschool education programs other than model programs and Head Start, evidence that bears more directly on the question at hand. Several literature reviews (including Barnett in 2008 and Nores and Barnett in 2010) have summarized much of this work. The evidence includes the longitudinal study of Child Parent Centers operated by the Chicago Public Schools and studies of the effects of several state pre-K programs (including universal pre-K in Georgia) that find positive effects on achievement and reductions in grade repetition. Studies from abroad have found universal pre-K increased test scores, improved behavior, decreased grade repetition, and increased educational attainment. Finally, international comparisons indicate that as participation in pre-K moves beyond 60 percent toward universal, average test scores at age 15 rise and inequality in these scores declines.

STEVE BARNETT
MILAGROS NORES
*National Institute for
Early Education Research*

Cascio responds:

Drs. Barnett and Nores leave the impression that I have overlooked a vast and relevant literature on the long-term effects of universal preschool. Yet almost all the U.S. programs they reference were targeted, not universal; short-term outcomes like test scores are not deterministically related to *adult* well-being, which was my focus; and experiences of other countries—with very different policy landscapes and populations—provide at least as weak a basis for drawing conclusions for the U.S. Moreover, I estimate the net effects of a large public *investment* in early education, not the

effects of *attending* preschool per se. Large interventions may have effects that offset any benefits from attendance. That my estimates incorporate such responses may make them more, not less, instructive.

Vouchers in New Orleans

Thanks to *Education Next* for publishing Michael B. Henderson's informative article on the voucher program in New Orleans ("In the Wake of the Storm," *features*, Spring 2010). With so much attention being focused on the expansion of charter schools after Hurricane Katrina, these scholarships tend to be overlooked. Mr. Henderson's piece serves as a useful reminder of the program's existence as well as an informative description of how the legislation was passed.

Unlike the charter schools, which have received broad support since their inception, the voucher program was a "heavy lift" for Governor Bobby Jindal. He and the legislature deserve much credit for taking this on. It would have been easy for reformers to use the continuing expansion of charter schools as an excuse for inaction on the voucher front, but thanks to their commitment hundreds of

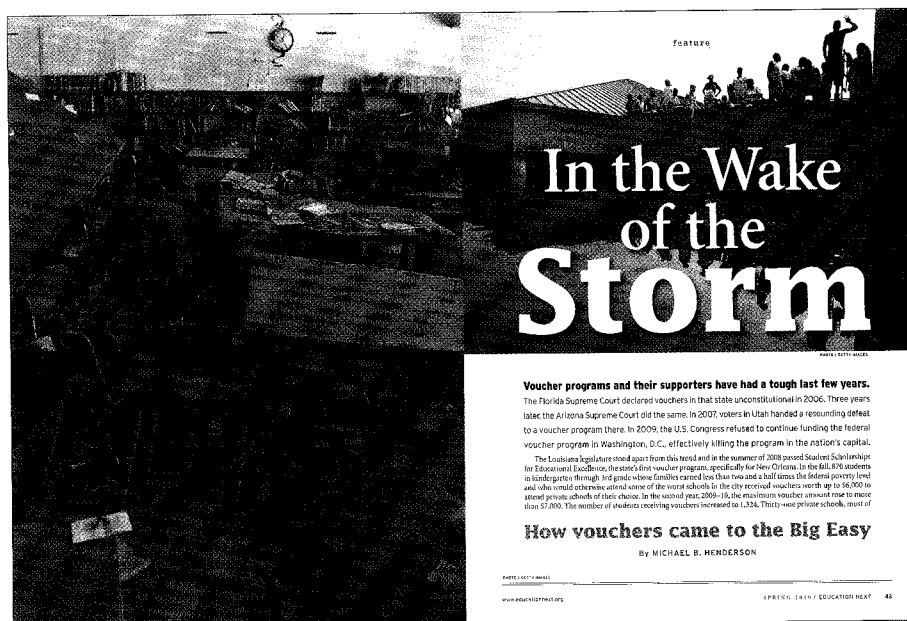
children can now attend the school of their choice.

In some respects, the expansion of charter schools made it harder for voucher advocates to make a compelling case for their need. But as Mr. Henderson describes, effective advocacy by organizations including the Archdiocese of New Orleans and the Black Alliance for Educational Options helped build support for these scholarships.

As Mr. Henderson points out, a number of conditions made it possible for New Orleans to become a hotbed of school reform. Some of these conditions may be replicable in other cities and some may not. But what these reforms can do is lay the groundwork for change around the country.

Perhaps success in New Orleans will serve as a springboard for expanding school choice in cities that still cope with inflexible unions and reluctant policymakers. That could be a more likely, and more beneficial, outcome than hoping that someone can replicate the unusual path to school choice that has been taken here in New Orleans.

KEVIN KANE
*President
Pelican Institute for
Public Policy*



In the Wake of the Storm

Voucher programs and their supporters have had a tough last few years.

The Florida Supreme Court declared vouchers unconstitutional in 2006. Three years later, the Arizona Supreme Court did the same. In 2007, voters in Utah handed a resounding defeat to a voucher program there. In 2009, the U.S. Congress refused to continue funding the federal voucher program in Washington, D.C., effectively killing the program in the nation's capital.

The Louisiana legislature stood apart from this trend and in the summer of 2008 passed Scholarships for Educational Excellence, the state's first voucher program, specifically for New Orleans. In the fall, 876 students in kindergarten through 12th grade whose families earned less than two and a half times the federal poverty level and who would otherwise attend one of the worst schools in the city received vouchers worth up to \$6,000 to attend private schools of their choice. In the second year, 2009-10, the maximum voucher amount rose to more than \$7,000. The number of students receiving vouchers increased to 1,324. Thirty-one private schools, most of

How vouchers came to the Big Easy

By MICHAEL B. HENDERSON

CSG: Helping State Policymakers in their Race to the Top

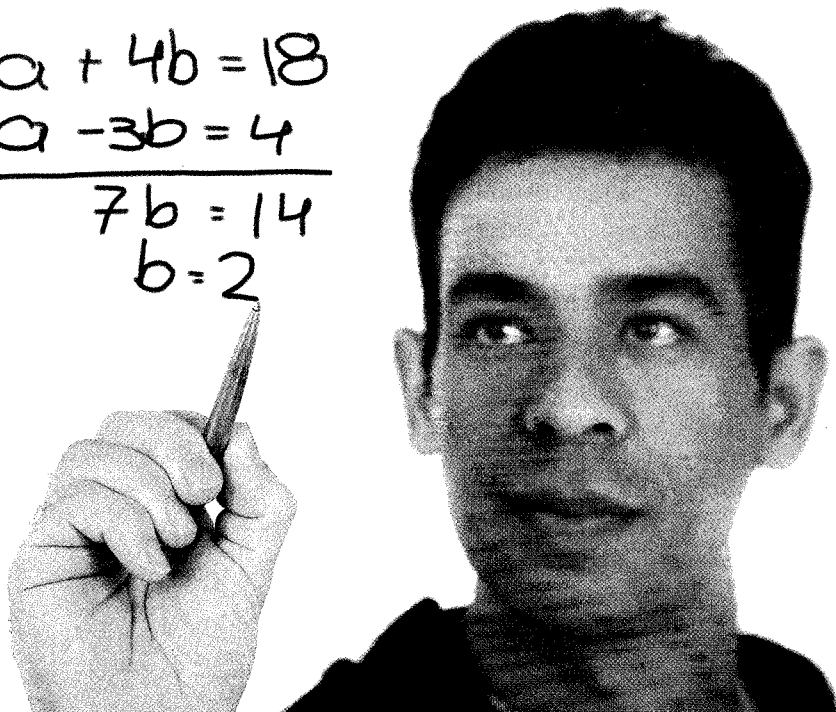
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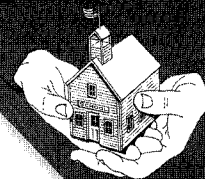
Legislators and other policymakers can rely on CSG to provide them with information that will make their states more competitive for *Race to the Top* dollars. The upcoming March issue of CSG's *Capitol Ideas* magazine will include a feature article focusing on changes the federal government expects states to make to qualify for these dollars and whether we can expect any of those changes to be reasonably long-lasting, especially among states that don't receive the selective funding.

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No Federal Case

Court says charter school is not a state actor

by JOSHUA DUNN and MARTHA DERTHICK

Teachers and students in public schools who believe that they have been deprived of a right guaranteed by the U. S. Constitution or laws can take their claims to a federal court. Not infrequently they do, to the consternation of school boards and administrators. Whether teachers and students in charter schools have

a comparable right can be a tricky legal question, as a recent decision from the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals shows.

Charter schools are created under state statutes, but they often retain a private character. Can they qualify as “state actors” for a plaintiff’s purpose of using Section 1983 of Title 42 of the U. S. Code, which is the main gateway for achieving relief? In the case from Arizona that the Ninth Circuit decided, the answer was no, and the claims of the plaintiff were dismissed.

The plaintiff, Michael Caviness, had been employed for six years as a teacher of health and physical education and a track coach at Horizon Community Learning Center, a nonprofit corporation that operated a charter school in Phoenix. A female student filed a grievance charging that he had crossed “the student-teacher boundary.” At a hearing, Horizon’s governing board learned that the student had a “crush” on Caviness and that the two had been communicating by telephone. The board concluded that he had exercised questionable judgment and kept him on paid administrative leave until his contract expired. When he applied for a job in the Mesa Public Schools, Horizon’s executive director declined to evaluate him, and Caviness claimed that what the director said to Mesa was “purposely false and incomplete” and intended to harm him. He further claimed that some Horizon employees had defamed him by falsely calling him a pedophile.

Caviness filed a complaint under Section 1983 alleging that Horizon had, without due process, deprived him of his liberty interest in finding work, in that it had not granted him a hearing to clear his name. To establish that the school was a “state actor,” he made five arguments: that Arizona law defines a charter school as a public school; that a charter school is a state actor for all purposes, including employment; that a charter school provides a public education, a function that is traditionally and exclusively the prerogative of the state; that a charter school is a state actor in Arizona because the state regulates the personnel matters of such schools; and that it

**We would be surprised
to see federal litigation
lead to a broad
characterization of
charters as
private actors.**

is a state actor because charter schools, unlike traditional private schools, are permitted to participate in the state’s retirement system.

The district court granted Horizon’s petition for dismissal for lack of federal jurisdiction. It found no evidence “with respect to [Caviness’s] specific employment claims, that Horizon acted in concert or conspired with state actors, was subject to government coercion or

encouragement, or was otherwise entwined or controlled by an agency of the State.”

Three circuit judges concurred that the actions that Horizon took or failed to take were all connected with its role as Caviness’s employer, and that what it did as such did not constitute “state action.” State action, it said, “may be found if, though only if, there is such a close nexus between the State and the challenged action that seemingly private behavior may be fairly treated as that of the State itself.”

Caviness failed because he did not establish the close nexus. It was not enough to argue that under Arizona law all charter schools are state actors. Without facts to show that Horizon was acting as “the government,” Caviness had no federal case.

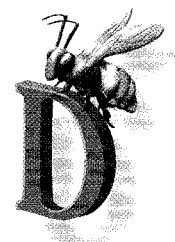
While the *Caviness* case could be a harbinger of more cases to come, we would be surprised to see federal litigation lead to a broad characterization of charters as private actors. Charters will likely increase in both number and federal financial support under President Obama, and with federal aid comes the force of laws emphasizing charter schools’ public character. Charters are explicitly obliged to abide by federal statutes prohibiting discrimination, for example. And while no federal law applies, the Department of Education’s guidance has made clear that charter schools must be nonreligious as well. Balking at either constraint would put charters at risk of losing not only federal aid but also their status as public schools, which has been critical to the charter movement’s success.

Joshua Dunn is associate professor of political science at the University of Colorado–Colorado Springs. Martha Derthick is professor emerita of government at the University of Virginia.



Competition Makes a Comeback

Academic bees and bowls attract top students



Paige Kimble won the 1981 Scripps National Spelling Bee with "sarcophagus," a word that any middle schooler who has studied a unit on the boy king Tutankhamun can use with aplomb.

Now consider the words tossed at the bee's 2009 finalists, all 12- and 13-year-olds: Laodicean, Maecenas, menhir, apodyterium, herniorrhaphy. Even a computer spell checker doesn't recognize them.

Palatschinken? What's happening here?

"The words are getting harder because the level of competition has risen," says Kimble, who's now the director of the national spelling bee. There are more children spending more hours studying more words, all for "the opportunity to shine on a national stage," she adds.

Today's teachers generally cringe at everything about that development. All those hours spent on one narrow academic focus! All that rote learning! All that stressful competition! And if some children shine on that national stage, what about the self-esteem of every other child whose luster is publicly shown to be not as bright?

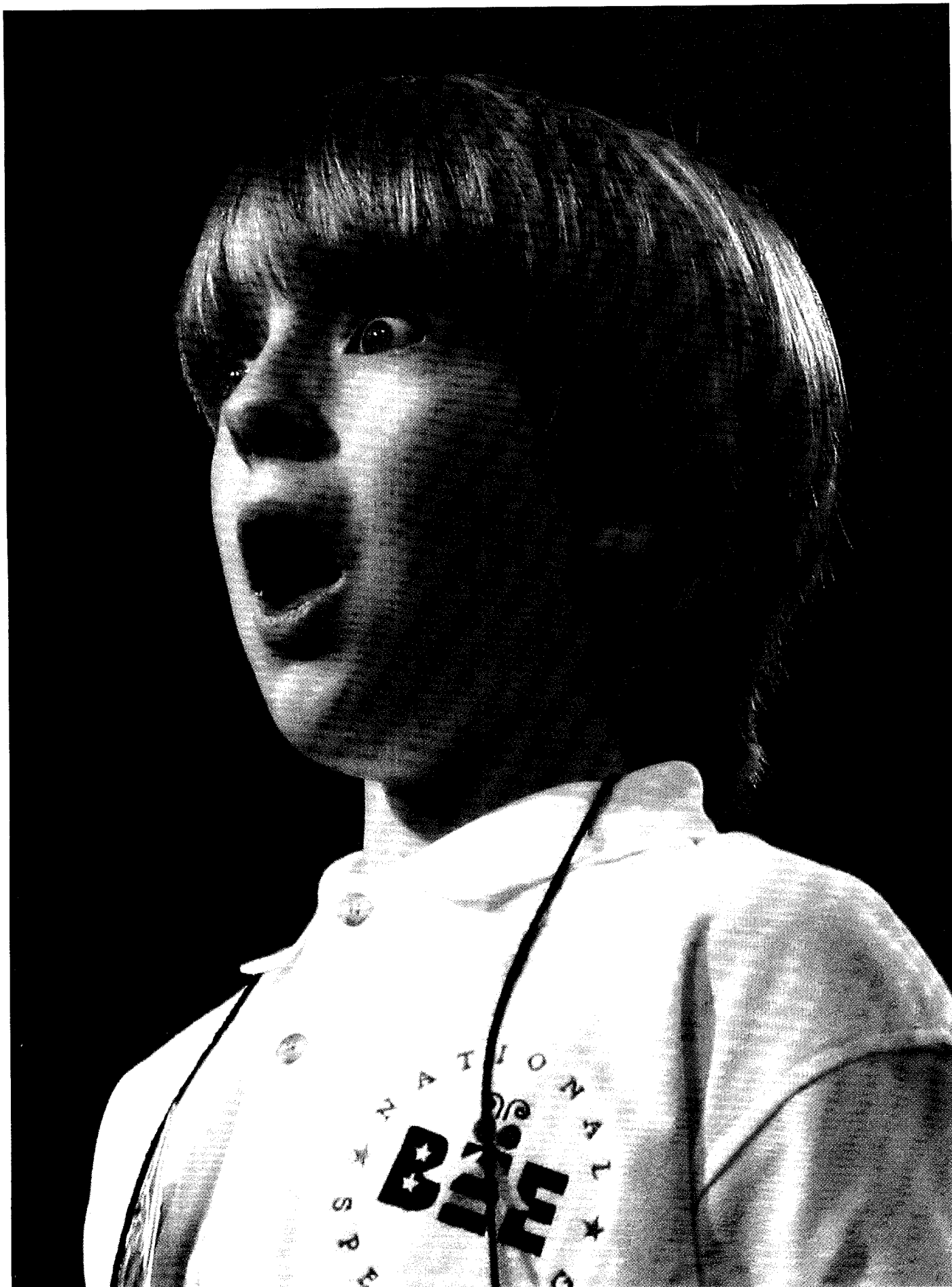
Good points, perhaps. But they haven't slowed the apparent growing interest among middle schoolers in the Scripps spell-off or any of the other bees, bowls, and academic olympiads that will climax in national championships this spring. The Scripps bee claims that 10 million children will take part in its spell-offs this year. Last year, 293 of them made it to the televised finals in Washington after winning local or regional runoffs sponsored by newspapers and community businesses. In 1981, there were just 120 finalists.

The National Geographic Bee, run by the National Geographic Society, claims between 4 million and 5 million yearly participants from 14,000 schools. One finalist from each state and territory will compete for \$50,000 in scholarships during the televised finals in May.

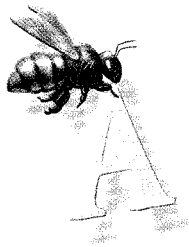
By JUNE KRONHOLZ

ILLUSTRATION / BILL CIGLIANO





ALEX WONG / GETTY IMAGES NEWS



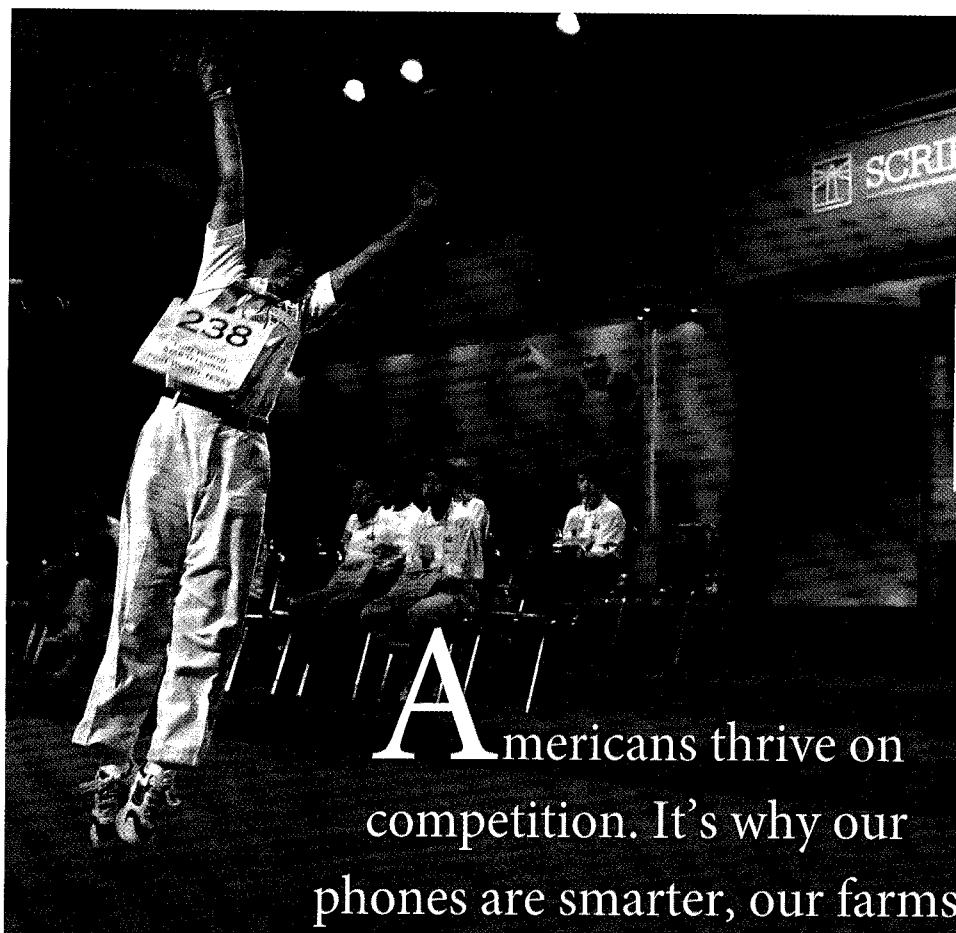
MATHCOUNTS, sponsored by the National Society of Professional Engineers and technology companies including Raytheon, says participation is up 10 percent in two years. There's also a National Science Bowl sponsored by the U.S. Department of Energy, a Bible Bowl, grammar bowls, and an International Brain Bee, where finalists identify the parts and functions of the brain—using human brains.

There may be an element of 21st-century angst in all of this: kids hoping that a national academic championship on their résumé will increase their chances of being accepted by an Ivy League college, at a time when that competition has never been tougher. "I'm setting my sights high, for Harvard or Yale," says Arjun Kandaswamy, who placed second in the 2009 National Geographic Bee and now, as a 9th grader, has aged out of the contest.

But Arjun would seem to be a strong contender even without a bee victory to his name. He's making "A"s in Advanced Placement U.S. history, honors literature and chemistry, and precalculus at Westview High School in Portland, Oregon. He's a member of his school science and debate teams, mentors 5th graders in science—and expects to make the varsity tennis team this spring. He also gushes endearingly about the joys of geography. Even studying it four hours a day, "geography is never a chore," he assured me.

Indeed, the dozen bee contestants I talked with are high achievers in everything they do: They challenge themselves with the toughest courses their schools offer, and still make time for sports, Key Club, Boy Scouts, piano, or the school robotics team. Some claim Rolodex memories; others attribute their success to hard—really hard—work. "I'm a very goal-oriented person," said Caitlin Snaring, who won the 2007 National Geographic Bee after creating a series of study guides and color-coded maps, analyzing the tapes of past national bees, and grilling past competitors on their study techniques.

If any of them suffered by not taking home the top prize, they don't show it. Zachary Zagorski, who came in 17th in the 2009 spelling bee, said his reaction to misspelling "strepitoso" was "OK, fine, I'm gone." They got involved in their bee, bowl, or olympiad for the same reasons most of us get involved in a hobby or career: they liked it, it held their



Americans thrive on competition. It's why our phones are smarter, our farms are more productive, our athletes run faster, our pop stars are raunchier, and our lives tend to be better every year.



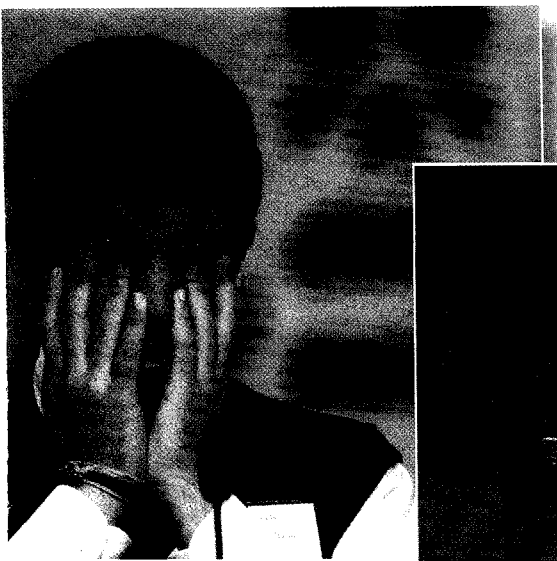
interest, and "I found out I was good at it," Zachary added.

They're the kind of kids that teachers say they don't have enough of: motivated, articulate, eager, resourceful, and charming. So as bee season swings into high gear, why are some people so uncomfortable about these kids and their victories?

Keeping Score

Americans thrive on competition. It's why our phones are smarter, our farms are more productive, our athletes run faster, our pop stars are raunchier, and our lives tend to be better—except for the raunchy pop stars—every year.

CHIP SOMODEVILLA / GETTY IMAGES NEWS



JEWEL SAMAD / AFP / GETTY IMAGES



ADAM TAYLOR / DISNEY ABC TELEVISION GROUP / GETTY IMAGES

Development. "We're much more prone to feeling that optimal development will come through positive messages than through negative feedback or punishment."

There aren't a lot of data to back that up, however. Daniel Willingham, a University of Virginia cognitive psychologist, says the research on collaboration vs. competition as teaching method is muddled, and not entirely trustworthy. "People who do research like the idea that there ought to be more cooperation—that's the sensibility within the education-research

community," he told me. "The danger is that researchers reach the answer they want to find."

The squeamishness about competition reached its extreme with the self-esteem movement of the 1990s, when researchers decided that low-performing kids would do better in school if they just, darn it, felt better about themselves. Schools dropped honor rolls, the class valedictorian, and assemblies that recognized academic stars, but not, of course, assemblies that recognized football or basketball or golf stars. At the feel-good movement's most absurd, "authentic experience" triumphed over standardized spelling and grammar. Ethnocentric math had its proponents. Everyone got a "good job" sticker, good job or not.

The self-esteem movement "probably backfired and made kids arrogant for no cause," said Willingham, who included himself in the self-esteem pack. Willingham and Morrison, among others, now see a change. "It has seeped into the public consciousness that we got that wrong," Willingham said. "Self esteem does not help with learning; high self-esteem goes with high test scores," not the other way around.

By eliminating many of those measures that show youngsters where they stand in the classroom, "we make kids feel a lot better about themselves, but we're not challenging them nearly as much as we did three, four, five generations ago," added Morrison.

The Drive to Compete

It's hard to trace the arc of the pendulum swing, but the standards movement—which led to state tests and from there to No Child Left Behind—seems one place to start. The Bush administration education law defines and punishes failure, and there are no extra points for a cocky walk.

Tough economic times are another place to look, says Aaron M. Pallas, a professor of sociology and education at

But American schools have been suspicious of competition for generations, and are generally horrified by the idea that success should be accompanied by a reward like a title, a trophy, or a cash prize. Knowledge is its own reward, after all.

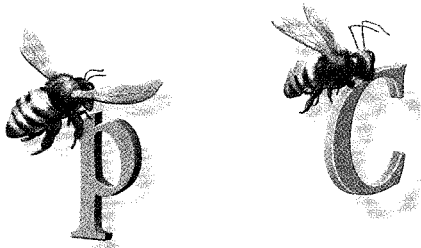
Carol Tomlinson, who taught in Virginia public schools for 21 years and is now a professor of educational leadership at the University of Virginia, makes the case against competition, even while arguing that schools have taken it to an extreme. Middle school is "the last time we have to get kids from low-income families to buy into school," she told me. The surest way to "incorporate and affiliate" those kids is to show them they can succeed; the surest way to lose them to indifference is to hand them proof of their own failure. And what could be clearer proof than to be knocked out of a spelling bee?

Susan Brookhart, former chair of the Department of Foundations and Leadership at Duquesne University's School of Education and now a consultant on testing and motivation, takes that argument one step further. "Anything that sets up a universe where it looks like being smart and dumb are traits that you're born with is not good for learning for anyone except—surprise!—the winners," she told me. She includes classroom star charts in that esteem-crushing universe, as well as anything that ranks youngsters against one another.

Competition "creates this idea among students that there are winners and losers, and 'puts them in their place' in that universe," Brookhart added.

That thinking has reshaped teaching over the past two decades. Classroom work is more collaborative and team-based, especially in math and science, where girls in particular are said to have benefited. Tracking and ability grouping have fallen into disfavor, easing the slower-learner stigma. Portfolio assessments are gaining ground. Report cards set out individualized goals.

"Societally, we view child development differently" than our parents did, and that has spilled over into the classroom, says Frederick J. Morrison, a professor at the University of Michigan's Center for Human Growth and



Teachers College, Columbia University. Middle-class kids and their parents are worried about getting into and paying for college. A high-school transcript that doesn't report grades or class standing doesn't help; neither does weakness in math and reading.

A national academic championship, or membership in the National Honor Society, might help, though. The number of schools with National Junior Honor Society chapters for middle schoolers has grown to 7,552 from 4,625 since 2000, says the National Association of Secondary School Principals, which runs the program. The number of National Honor Society chapters is up by one-third in the same time.

No Child Left Behind doesn't say anything about spelling and geography bees, of course, but its impact on academic go-getters is a matter of some debate. Teachers and researchers grumble that the law focuses teachers' attention on getting youngsters over a bar of minimal competency. There's no reward for getting stronger students to proficiency, or really bright kids to some advanced level. "Kids in the higher ranges of knowledge or skill find classes pretty desolate these days," said UVA's Tomlinson.

No Child Left Behind critics also contend that the law has narrowed learning to what's on the test, and spelling, geography, and science aren't. And teachers complain that they haven't the time to teach anything else, anyway. Kids looking for a challenge may have to look outside their schools, adds Tomlinson, because "classrooms haven't engaged anyone for a whole academic generation now."

The bee finalists I talked with had a far brighter view of their schools than that (and most of them attended public schools), although some did complain of teachers who asked little of them and classes they claimed they could sleep through. The encouraging news is that bright, motivated youngsters can usually seek out gifted-and-talented programs, accelerated classes, and daunting amounts of extra work, which is what bee contestants appear to do.

Eric Yang, a Colony, Texas, 8th grader who won the 2009 geography bee, is taking pre-AP classes in science, U.S. history, and English at Griffin Middle School, plus geometry at the local high school. William Lee IV, who finished third in the 2008 geography bee, is taking Italian and Spanish at Woburn High School in Massachusetts, plus "honors classes for everything else." Caitlin Snaring took her first AP class—and got a perfect AP test score—as a freshman.

For many of these superachievers, bees and bowls are just one more academic challenge, one more way to test themselves. "It's about me working to improve myself," said Sidharth Chand, who was knocked out of the 2009 spelling-bee finals on "apodeiterium." "I didn't get involved because I didn't find school challenging; it was an extra thing." Sidharth, who went to the 2008 spelling bee finals, too, is taking six honors classes at Detroit Country Day



CHIP SOMODEVILLA / GETTY IMAGES NEWS

School and, as "an extra thing," is on the school Quiz Bowl and Science Olympiad teams.

Indeed, the kids I talked to load themselves with extra challenges. Eric Yang has been entering science, math, art, and impromptu-speaking competitions sponsored by the University of Texas in Austin since he was in 4th grade—and that's in addition to the piano competitions he likes. Caitlin Snaring was in a Bible memory program.

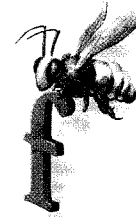
Tim Ruiter, a Centreville, Virginia, home schooler, competed in the finals of a national math and science bowl two weeks before the 2009 spelling-bee finals, where he tied for second place after flubbing "Maecenas."

The internal challenge isn't the only reason youngsters take on the incredible workload of a national bee, though. There's the honor of representing their state or hometown, some of them told me. There's the prospect of a trip to Washington, D.C., for the finals. There's the chance to spend time with youngsters who share their passion for word roots or river systems or algebra, many said. "I thought it would be fun to meet people who know geography like I did," said Eric Yang.

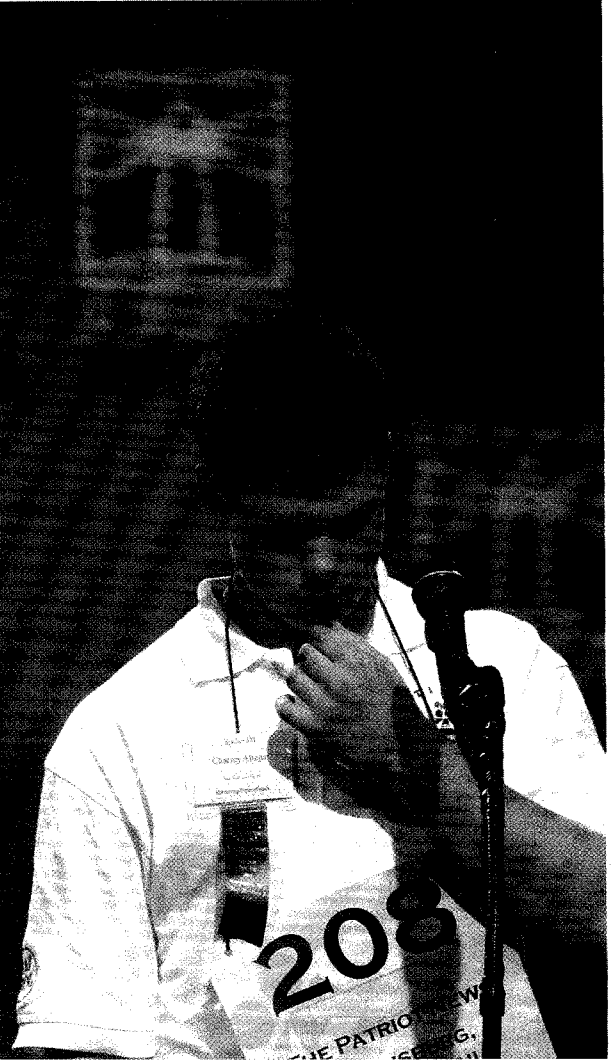
Many kids talked of the thrill, and benefits, of competition. "I'm competitive; I just like to win," said Kirsie Anselmi-Stith, a Rock Springs, Wyoming, 8th grader who will compete in the geography-bee finals this spring for the third time.

"It's good to have rivals—they push you to be your best," added Kenny Aouad, who reached the 2007, 2008, and 2009 spelling-bee finals. Kenny, the son of Ghanaian immigrants who live in Terra Haute, Indiana, apparently found the pushing helpful: He's now attending Choate Rosemary Hall in Connecticut on a full scholarship.

A bee is "something you really like doing, and it's showing everyone I'm the best at what I'm doing and it's the



Webster's Third New
International Dictionary,
the spelling bee's definitive source,



AFP / GETTY IMAGES

lists 476,000 words that might be
called out. The geography bee
directs contestants to a 500-page
reference book.



competition. It was everything coming together," said Arjun Kandaswamy, the 2009 geography bee runner-up.

The most common refrain I heard, though, was much simpler than any of that. "It was pretty fun," said Kenyi Aouad.

"It was real great fun," added Sidharth Chand.

"It was very fun," said Aishwarya Pastapur, who competed in the 2009 spelling bee.

"It was always fun," agreed William Lee.

Fun?

Handling Defeat

That's hard for detractors to imagine. They fret about the stress heaped on the young shoulders of bee finalists and the agony of defeat on tender egos. Indeed, newspaper accounts of the 2009 spelling-bee finals suggest swirling drama, tension, and heartbreak. Sidharth Chand "buried his head in his hands for about a minute" after flubbing his word, the Associated Press reported. A contestant from Las Vegas "took a seat in her mother's lap and wiped a tear or two."

The auditorium was "tension-packed," the audience let out sighs of "nervous exhalation," young faces "drooped," and eliminated contestants mingled in the hallway, "stunned by defeat," the AP added. Talk about child abuse!

The popular image of bee contestants, moreover, is that they spend hours on grinding memorization and mind-numbing rote that robs them of time for creative thought and interdisciplinary learning. Webster's Third New International Dictionary,



THE WASHINGTON POST / GETTY IMAGES

The kids I talked to saw their bees as a happy experience that broadened their knowledge rather than narrowed it.



the spelling bee's definitive source, lists 476,000 words that might be called out. The geography bee directs contestants to a 500-page reference book written by a past winner. Are these the kinds of thinkers we want in a 21st-century economy?

But the kids I talked to saw their bees as a happy experience that broadened their knowledge rather than narrowed it. Sidharth Chand may have buried his head in his hands as the AP reported, but "after that, I became involved in my schoolwork again and then it was preparation for high school. There was other work to do and that took precedence over moping around," he said.

Aishwarya Pastapur, who spelled the Dutch homonym "mynheer" for "menhir," admitted she "cried for a few days" after tying for second place. "I felt so horrible because I know both words. I still feel horrible sometimes," she said.

But that hasn't stopped Aishwarya from going out for the scholastic bowl at her Springfield, Illinois, high school or the International Brain Bee, which was founded by University of Maryland neuroscientist Norbert Myslinski. That contest, for

high schoolers only, includes a neuroanatomy practical and a patient diagnosis that Dr. Myslinski pegs to the second year of medical school.

Most of the kids I talked with told me that they were proud that they had come so far, not dismayed that they had fallen just short. "That was the best I'd ever done. My family was proud of me, so there was no reason to be disappointed," said Kenyri Aouad.

Losing "made me want to win even more," said Caitlin Snaring, who said her defeat in the 2006 geography bee "got me fired up" to win the 2007 contest.



"It could have gone either way," said Arjun Kandaswamy, who lost the 2009 geography bee to Eric Yang on a question that they both were asked about the Timiș River in Romania. "I studied hard, he studied hard. I did everything I could. It's just bad luck that I got that close and didn't make it," Arjun said with amazing equipoise.

Even in losing, some found themselves hometown celebrities, which certainly would have salved any sting of defeat. "Oceanside just embraced him totally," Shari Zagorski told me about her son, Zachary, and their Long Island, New York, community's reaction to his trip to the 2009 spelling-bee finals. Oceanside youngsters accounted for 6 of the 31 contestants at the Long Island regional contest this fall, she said. "Spelling suddenly became cool."

If youngsters are indeed "stunned by defeat," Mary Lee Elden said she doesn't see it. Elden started and still runs the geography bee for the National Geographic Society, which fetes the finalists with a tour-filled weekend in Washington before the televised face-off. Elden said she keeps cookies and juice backstage for eliminated contestants, and some years "we've had to send people back there to tell them to keep quiet, they're having so much fun."

Of course, kids who can't handle defeat don't generally get involved in such a high-pressure contest, or don't make it to the national finals in the first place.

Winning Ways

In the same self-selecting way, kids who don't find pleasure in the hours of study that generally are part of bee preparations don't get involved, either.

Several youngsters told me they have near-photographic memories that kept preparations for their bees to a mere hour or so a night. But most said they worked darn hard—and often quite creatively—to master their subjects. Tim Ruiter, the Virginia home schooler, took a class in Greek and Latin word roots to prepare for the 2009 spelling-bee finals. This year, with one year of eligibility left (the bee is open only to those in 8th grade or lower), he is studying German to better understand the spelling patterns in words with Germanic roots.

The best spellers aren't memorizers, "they're word sleuths," the spelling bee's Paige Kimble told me, spelling out "sleuth," just as you'd expect a spelling maven to do. The most successful contestants are kids who learn about language patterns and "have an incredible sense of how language is put together," she added.

Some kids assembled mountains of flashcards and binders of maps, lists, and fact sheets. Arjun Kandaswamy said he studied for the geography bee finals by "layering"—starting with "the basic stuff" like continents and countries, and gradually adding layers of geographic complexity. Remarkably, I thought,

only one youngster said he got any help from a teacher: a Bridgewater (MA) State College professor offered William Lee several all-day tutorials before the geography bee.

I checked the spelling and geography bee web sites for the names of bee winners for the past 12 years (the period of the greatest surge in immigration in a century), and found that exactly half were youngsters whose names suggested they are Asian immigrants or the children of Asian immigrants, and that most of those were Indian or Indian American.

Daniel Willingham attributes that in part to the Asian esteem of knowledge and tradition of rote learning. A simpler answer is that the Indian American community has embraced spelling bees in a way no other group has. There are chat rooms and blogs where Indian Americans discuss spelling, bees are widely reported in Indian papers, and winners are heroes—even back in Bangalore and Delhi. Spelling is to Indians, it seems, as baseball is to Dominicans or football to Samoans: a way for strivers to shine.

Anyone uncomfortable with that only has to look at the names of the other winners: Williams, O'Dorney, Wojtanik, Haddad-Fonda. As American as apple pie.

The one common denominator among the kids I talked to is that they read—a lot. Newspapers, cookbooks, novels, travel magazines, nonfiction. "Pretty much everything," said Zachary Zagorski, whose current favorite is a series of novels about Artemis Fowl, a boy described as "the world's greatest criminal mastermind." Geography bee finalists said they also pore over maps, atlases, foreign money, and Google Earth—and have ever since a parent first traveled to Bern or a friend sent a postcard from Kashmir.

The few studies of Nobel laureates and other groundbreaking thinkers suggests that doggedness, even more than raw ability, separates them from other high-level experts in their field, says Daniel Willingham. Nobel winners "tend to be very good, but not amazing," he told me. "What differentiates them is not that the Nobel winners have more raw horsepower, but that they have a very high threshold for mental exhaustion. They keep working at problems when the rest of us have to get up and go watch 'So You Think You Can Dance' or something."

Maybe that tells us something about bee contestants, and maybe bee contestants tell us something about our kids and our schools. "Standards increase the effort; effort increases the knowledge level," says the University of Michigan's Frederick Morrison.

Okay, everyone: Where's the Limpopo, what's the currency of Nauru, and is it a-p-o-g-g-i-a-t-u-r-a or a-p-p-o-g-g-i-a-t-u-r-a?

June Kronholz is a former Wall Street Journal foreign correspondent, bureau chief, and education reporter. She has lived on five continents, knows the capitals of Africa, and is a good speller.

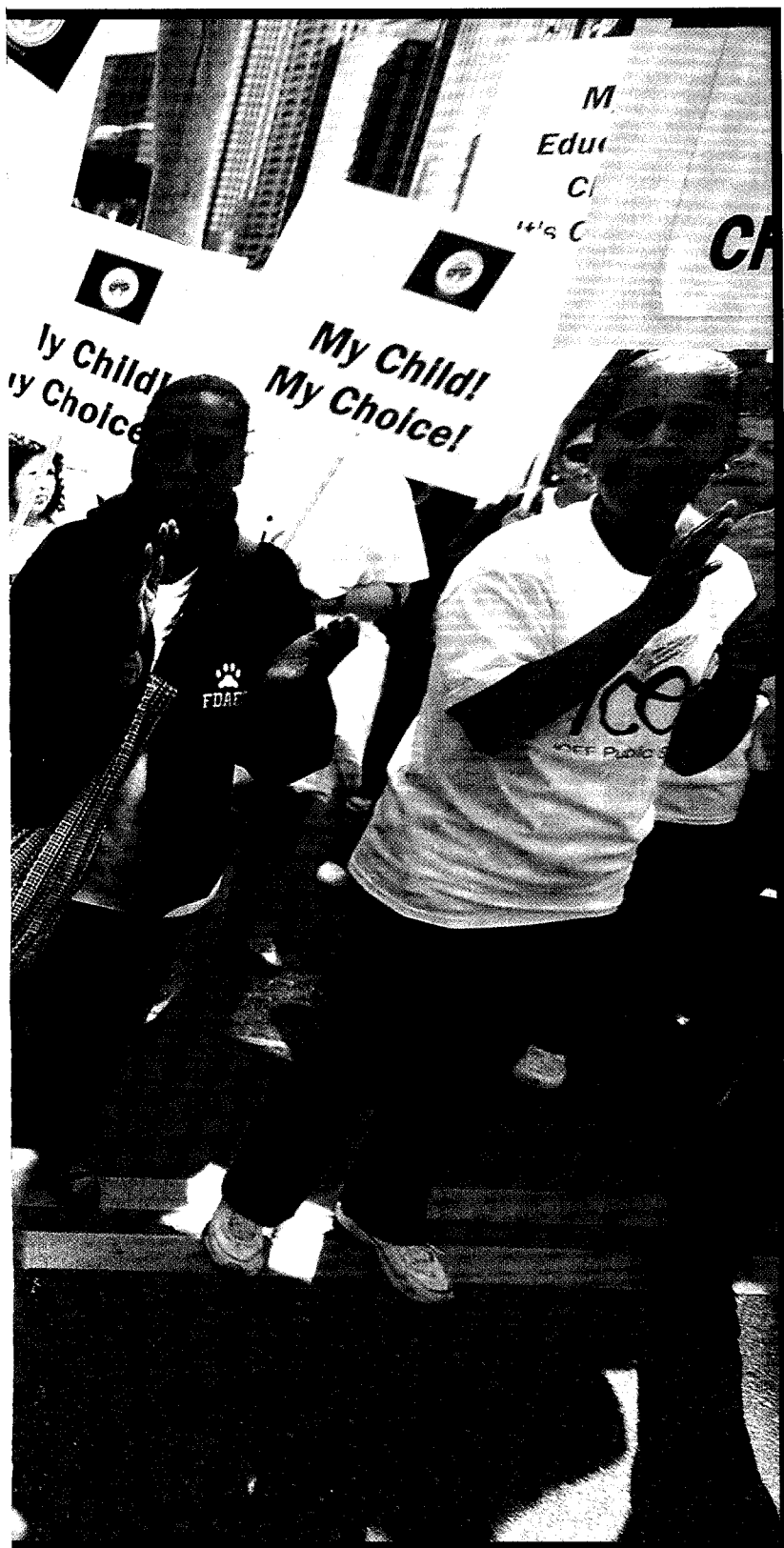
Palace Revolt in



PHOTOGRAPHY / L.A. TIMES

Los Angeles?

By BRUCE FULLER



Antonio Villaraigosa, the handsome high-voltage mayor of Los Angeles, really comes alive when recalling his start in local politics—as a labor organizer agitating for reform inside decrepit and overcrowded schools. “I cut my teeth working for the union. I cultivated these young teachers who had come to these schools to change the world,” he said, brimming with pride.

Back in 1989, one of those teachers, Joshua Pechthalt, joined Villaraigosa for a rally downtown in Exposition Park. Pechthalt remembers his charismatic young friend pumping up the crowd. “Antonio was the master of ceremonies who had parents and teachers on their feet,” recalled Pechthalt, now vice president of United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA). “When we see each other, to this day, we give each other a hug.”

By 1994, the popular Villaraigosa was departing for the state capitol, rocketed into a legislative seat by grateful teachers, not to mention the union’s campaign contributions. Fellow legislators chose Villaraigosa to become the first-ever Latino Speaker. Back home in East Los Angeles, the teachers associations would spend over \$1 million

Charter schools and Latino leaders push unions to innovate

during his six-year tenure in Sacramento to ensure that Villaraigosa would be reelected.

“As Speaker, I was without question the number one advocate for the unions,” Villaraigosa reminisced. Teacher pay hikes sailed through the legislature. He made sure that the push to hold educators accountable for results stopped short of challenging protection of dismal teachers and stymied efforts to send strong teachers into weak schools.

Fast-forward to 2010 and Villaraigosa finds himself in the vortex of a political torrent. "I'm Public Enemy Number One within the UTLA," he told me. In his quest to turn around the schools, the mayor has united working-class Latino parents, civil rights leaders, and big-money Democrats to challenge union leaders. "It's been a war," he said. "It's a war I'm willing to wage." After a series of bloody battles against his old union friends, including a 2007 loss in the courts, the mayor gained the upper hand last fall when the L.A. school board passed a radical reform plan that he helped to craft. Over the next few years, the district intends to hand off one-third of its 800-plus campuses to managers of charter schools, other nonprofits, and inventive district educators.

Democratic leaders have enriched the unions over the past half century, creating millions of jobs for dues-paying teachers, feeding the building trades via school construction, and granting bargaining rights to teachers in the 1970s. But union leaders, of late, find themselves on the far edge of the national debate over how to lift students and their flagging schools. Test scores have largely stalled in recent years and gaps have widened slightly, according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Labor chiefs are openly miffed over President Obama's offer of moral support and billions of federal dollars to escalate the "war" being waged by Villaraigosa and his fellow mayors. "In a place like L.A. or Detroit, where the public schools are dysfunctional," Secretary of Education Arne Duncan told me, "I don't think that the system can by itself go where it has to go. You have to rally all elements of the community. The person who can rally all those actors is the mayor."

Villaraigosa is not the only city chief to take charge of urban schools. But his battle for mayoral control in Los Angeles offers a cautionary tale for all sides. It reveals new tensions between teachers union leaders and Democratic mayors. But charter school enthusiasts should not expect that close alliance, nurtured over many years, to be disrupted overnight. Politicians are highly skilled at finding a middle ground between demands for reform and protection of old connections. As much as Villaraigosa—and the school superintendent with whom he is allied—have appeared committed to rapid charter school expansion, when the L. A. school board took decisive action in February, charters were forced to settle for much less than they expected. Instead of getting the lion's share of the schools they sought, charters were left with only four. Newly formed teacher groups won the vast majority of school contracts after they formed an alliance with UTLA. The charters were left with their tongues hanging out.

The Players

Villaraigosa returned to L.A. in 2000, eager to become the city's first Latino mayor since 1872. His union friends contributed

Building on Prior Reforms

The Los Angeles charter-and-choice effort has attracted plenty of national attention, in part because its foundations resemble those of President Obama's Race to the Top initiative. But L.A. has over the past two decades built ambitious programs to decentralize school management and widen options for parents.

In partnership with nonprofit groups and local universities, the mayor's office runs five *iDesign* schools (also dubbed *partnership* schools). The mayor's consolation prize after he lost his bid to take over the entire system, these schools operate under "a more localized decision-making authority as a strategy to improve student achievement," according to Superintendent Ray Cortines's 15-page guide to school options.

The district's *pilot* schools, similar to those in Boston, are a key part of the L.A. school board's own experiment with semi-autonomous schools. Cortines struck a deal with the union to expand their number from 10 to 30, beginning in the fall of 2010. These typically small schools operate under thin labor contracts, giving principals more authority over the hiring and firing of teachers and awarding teachers a wider range of flexible roles. Some teacher groups, opposed to charter school expansion, submitted bids to take over eligible choice campuses as pilot schools.

Magnet schools are mission-driven organizations with specialized curricula, similar to magnets in other cities, and aim to lessen racial segregation among schools. L.A. currently operates 15 magnet schools and 173 magnet programs, many hosted by conventional public schools. Competition is fierce to win a magnet slot, as less than one-fifth of applicants gain admission.

Charter schools number 161 in L.A., more than operate in any other district nationwide. Still, they serve less than one-tenth of the district's students.

another \$2 million in traceable dollars to his mayoral campaigns in 2001 and 2005. Leaders of the California Teachers Association even talked up Villaraigosa as California's next photogenic governor, the Democratic heir apparent to Republican Arnold Schwarzenegger.

At first, the old polarities seemed to hold, pitting education groups like the UTLA against downtown developers and fiscal conservatives. Then the mayor began to echo the impatience expressed by blue-collar Latino parents, packed into graying apartments and tiny cottages spread across East Los Angeles. For decades these families saw no options other than sending their children to overcrowded, sometimes dangerous schools.

Villaraigosa grew up in a broken barrio home. "My father left when I was young; we lived in abject poverty," he recalled. His roots in Chicano politics taught him about L.A.'s racial dynamics in the 1950s, when "Mexicans" were simply kept out of predominantly white schools.

Running for mayor in 2005, after losing his first bid, Villaraigosa began talking with a variety of activists, including Maria Brenes, who runs Innerscity Struggle, a group that fights for small, more rigorous high schools. She works from a modest office in the heart of East Los Angeles. A musty fragrance permeates two rooms, blending L.A.'s unrelenting heat with too many eager organizers stuffed into a small space. "Public education has been going downhill in East L.A. for some time," Brenes said. "Schools built for 1,000 students are now at 5,000."

Parents worry over these densely packed schools in which teachers simply lose track of kids. Alicia Ortiz, for example, made sure that her daughter escaped Garfield High School, once home to Jaime Escalante, the math teacher made famous in *Stand and Deliver*. "They have so many students it doesn't matter if your student is in school or not," Ortiz said. Her daughter now attends a charter school.

Candidate Villaraigosa also met with wealthy Democrats worried sick over the quality of the schools, like developer and philanthropist Eli Broad. "In L.A. there is no one responsible for the schools," Broad said. "The board is made up of political wannabes. The only time we have seen dramatic change in urban education is when you have mayoral control."

Initial evidence backs Broad's claim. After tracking progress in a dozen cities where mayors have grabbed the tiller—including Chicago, New York, and Washington, D.C.—Brown University professor Kenneth Wong concluded that students benefit significantly. Reading performance in these cities' high schools climbed by one-third of a standard deviation when compared with urban districts serving similar kids, on par with the impact of providing quality preschools. City residents also reported feeling better about their local schools, a key win for municipal leaders eager to stem white flight and shrinking property values, as Wong detailed.

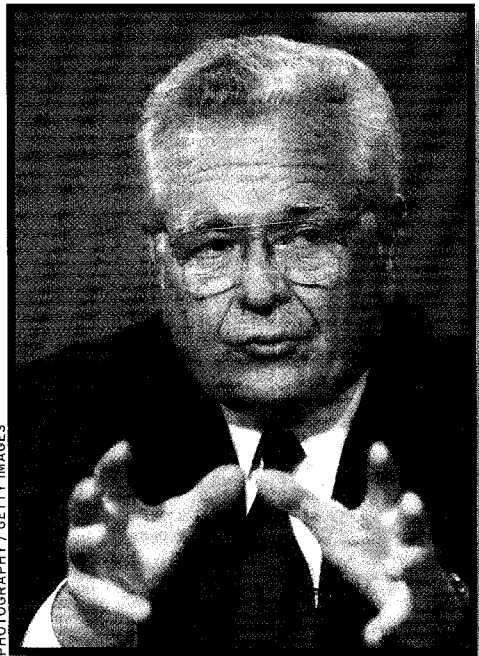
Broad's collateral assault on the downtown school bureaucracy includes growing new charter schools and attracting strong principals who gain unfettered authority to hire and fire their own teachers. L.A.'s activists are further bolstered

by a statewide charter lobby that's picked up considerable clout in recent years, capitalized by Broad, Netflix founder Reed Hastings, and most recently Bill Gates. Villaraigosa soon came to see charters as a lever for organizational innovation, since "parents are hungry for change," he said. And these well-heeled Democratic donors, for now, offset declining campaign support from the unions.

The Setting

Villaraigosa's predecessor, James Hahn, did little to challenge the pace of change inside the L.A. Unified School District. Roy Romer, the former Colorado governor and head of the Democratic National Committee, came to L.A. as superintendent in 2001. He pushed to award principals more discretion over budgets and the power to assemble strong teams of teachers, reforms largely thwarted by the UTLA. Romer standardized the curriculum and required

Roy Romer came to L.A. as superintendent in 2001. He pushed to award principals more discretion over budgets and the power to assemble strong teams of teachers.



PHOTOGRAPHY / GETTY IMAGES

teachers to follow weekly timetables. Student scores inched upward on Romer's watch. Still, less than one-sixth of L.A. 8th graders now read and write proficiently, according to federal assessments.

After winning the mayor's race in 2005, Villaraigosa wasn't about to accept this glacial pace of progress. Catching his union benefactors off guard, he soon announced his intention to take

control of the far-flung L.A. school system, citing strides made by Mayor Richard M. Daley in Chicago and Michael Bloomberg in New York. "We have got to move away from a model where school boards are defenders of a failed status quo, where the unions just control the board," Villaraigosa said.

But wresting control of the schools from Romer and loyal board members required that Villaraigosa return to Sacramento to win legislative approval. Unlike other states, California sets the powers of local school boards in the state constitution. Villaraigosa had to negotiate with statewide teacher groups since they continue to sway Democratic legislators through old alliances and rich campaign contributions.

UTLA president A. J. Duffy sensed an opening, negotiating with Villaraigosa to grant teachers greater control over curriculum and pedagogical practices. In return, the unions would endorse the mayor's plan. The surreal and controversial power-sharing deal that emerged in Sacramento resembled governance

The notion that anyone might take command of the sprawling L.A. Unified's 885 schools,

even a mayor with boundless energy, feels like a Disney movie, an ever-hopeful fiction.

The Plot

The notion that anyone might take command of the sprawling L.A. Unified's 885 schools, even a mayor with boundless energy, feels like a Disney movie, an ever-hopeful fiction. The district spreads across 710 square miles, half the size of Delaware, and serves more than 688,000 students. The system hosts the nation's single largest public-works program, a \$27 billion effort to build more than 130 new schools and renovate countless others. It employs over 36,700 classroom teachers and, curiously, an equal number of managers and support staff.

Back in Sacramento, Villaraigosa emerged victorious. The legislature passed the mayoral-control plan, and Governor Schwarzenegger signed

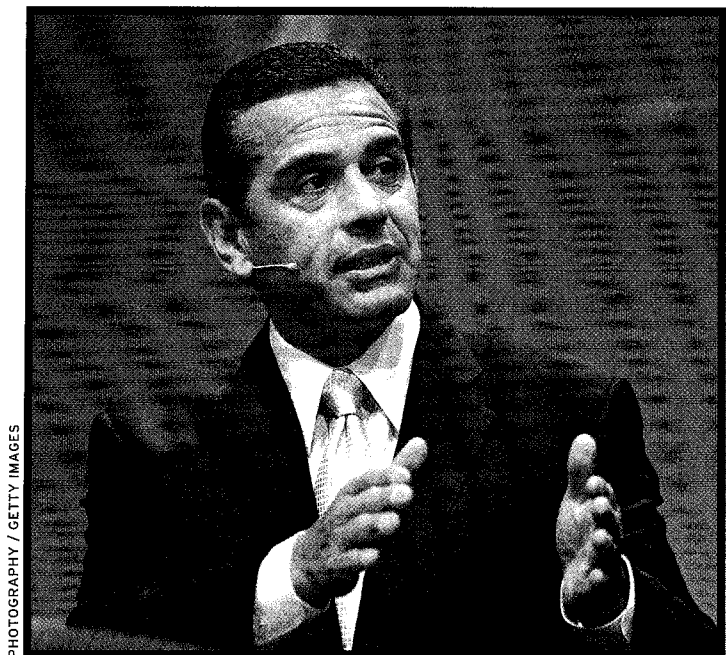
the deal in the summer of 2006. But Romer fought back in the courts, winning on appeal in spring 2007. So, the unstoppable mayor simply pivoted and went with Plan B. "We also had a Plan C," Villaraigosa joked, reviewing his battles against the union. "We would go to the end of the alphabet if necessary."

Villaraigosa outflanked Romer, rallying support for three challengers to incumbent members of the school board who had sided with the schools chief during the prolonged legal battle. "I raised millions, defeated the union candidates, and we won a majority of the board," the mayor recalled. Three million to be exact, coming mostly from wealthy Democratic donors. Among the mayor's allies, newly elected to the school board, was another rising L.A. star, Yolie Flores.

Petite in stature, soft-spoken in style, Flores seemed an unlikely dragon slayer. Yet she had already proven to be a Latina Saul Alinsky of sorts, organizing parents around the

issues of scarce child care and unsafe schools. She arrived on the board impatient and eager to ramp up reform efforts. "The community has reached a level of exasperation, of ongoing failure (in the schools)," she told me. Little love was lost between Flores and the UTLA. During her campaign, she opposed a moratorium on opening new charter schools. In

of the Palestinian territories (see "Power Struggle in Los Angeles," *forum*, Summer 2007). And the school board, which the UTLA could often dominate, would have lost most of its authority. The union's conservative wing came unglued, forcing a vote on Duffy's deal with the mayor, which the rank and file soundly rejected.



PHOTOGRAPHY / GETTY IMAGES

turn, the union refused to endorse her candidacy. Still, no one predicted that she would lead a palace revolt.

Flores's idea to push charter expansion and parental choice took shape by early 2009. Sessions with advocates included well-connected operators like Ben Austin, first a deputy to Republican mayor of Los Angeles Richard Riordon, then a political aide to film director Rob Reiner. Austin is a hard-driving politico from the affluent west side of L.A., and now the unlikely head of Parent Revolution, a mostly Latina advocacy group led by the Los Angeles Parents Union and bankrolled by Broad and charter proponents. He argued that newly built campuses would provide the affordable facilities that charter firms required to expand. Flores also found on her desk a UCLA study of dropout rates, revealing that fully two-thirds of students entering the high schools in her area, including Garfield High, never graduate. Flores felt like the only sane person in an asylum, "walking around not knowing whether to cry or scream. In the district office there was a very casual sense of the crisis," she said.

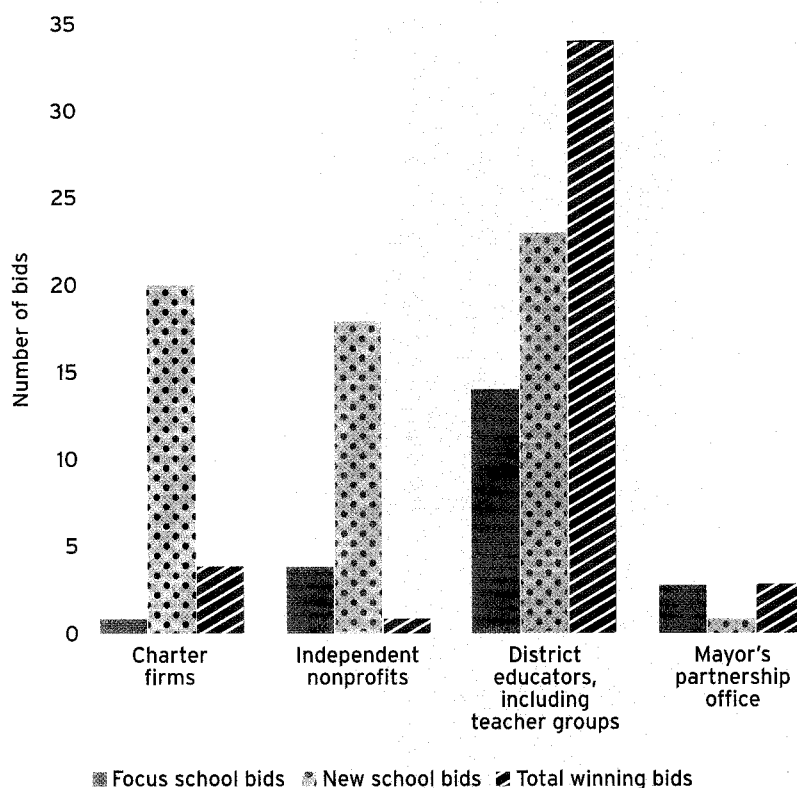
By early summer, Villaraigosa felt that he could swing his school board to support Flores's dramatic proposal. He also received an unexpected dose of capital to advance the plan from Hollywood mogul Casey Wasserman, who donated \$4.5 million to the district's own reform office. For Villaraigosa, charters were just one piece of the puzzle. Along with the new schools chief, Ray Cortines, the mayor sought to integrate Flores's charter plan with his own "partnership schools" and Cortines's commitment to "pilot schools" and thin labor contracts. Together, these experiments were to extend decentralized management and dollars to hundreds of L.A. schools (see sidebar, page 22).

One Democratic donor told me, not for attribution, "This is an all-out war that needs to be attacked from every angle. Charters are a piece of the puzzle, but not the only, nor the largest, piece." With about 55,000 kids enrolled in L.A. charter schools, "you don't solve the problem through 10 percent of the kids."

Tensions were intensifying between Latino leaders and the UTLA by early in the summer of 2009. As Flores walked into the cramped auditorium at Annendale Elementary School for a meeting, she suddenly deciphered the shrill chanting of neatly dressed 2nd graders. "Shame on you, shame on you,"

Crowded Field (Figure 1)

Charter firms submitted one-quarter of the takeover plans and won just four schools.



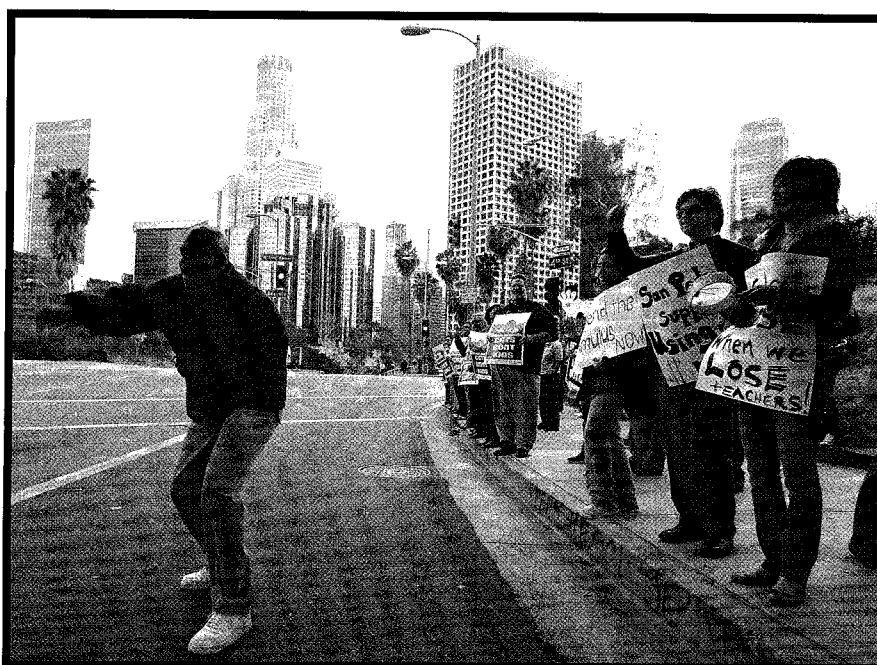
SOURCE: Los Angeles Unified School District web site, applicant team proposals submitted as of January 12, 2010; LAUSD press release dated February 23, 2010

they cried out with quizzical faces, miffed by their own angry words. "I was shocked, I couldn't believe it," Flores recalled. She had voted for necessary budget cuts as the recession deepened, and her reform ideas had surfaced. Now union activists had wound up these children to deliver their barbed message. Villaraigosa parried back, calling Duffy and company "the most backward labor union in the nation. We're not going to be held hostage by a small group of people," a thinly veiled reference to UTLA leaders.

By mid-summer, Flores and Villaraigosa were ready to hatch their charter-and-choice initiative, at first urging the school board to hand off 50 recently opened campuses to charter firms and nonprofit reform groups. Then, a second board ally pushed the mayor to include a total of 251 low-performing schools within the proposal. If the mayor could deliver his new majority on the board—the vote was set for late August—more than one-third of L.A.'s schools would eventually compete in a marketplace unprecedented in scope. UTLA leaders, not surprisingly, went ballistic.

If the mayor could deliver his new majority on the board, more than one-third of L.A.'s schools would eventually compete in a marketplace unprecedented in scope. UTLA leaders, not surprisingly, went ballistic.

PHOTOGRAPHY / GETTY IMAGES



The Mayor Wins a Round

To bolster their stance, union leaders highlighted their recent support of certain innovations, including expanding Cortines's experiment with decentralized pilot schools, operating under flexible labor contracts and granting principals greater authority. But the union reluctantly endorsed this model, "because teachers are demanding them," said Brian Fritch, a Garfield High history teacher and union insurgent. Fritch's generation of teachers has few historical roots with the labor movement, yet they speak of social justice and daily serve kids from working-class families. He has spoken out publicly against the UTLA's habits of protecting lousy teachers and resisting greater power for reform-minded principals.

UTLA leaders, including the mayor's old friend, Joshua Pechthalt, worry that new Democrats, like Flores, Villaraigosa, and even President Obama, are "looking to have one teacher competing against another, one school against another." Market values and monetary incentives are displacing a cooperative spirit, Pechthalt argued. "Our satisfaction (as teachers) comes when you look around and say, 'the students got it,' and you have connected with the kids."

But Villaraigosa is not one to mull over competing political theories. The week before the crucial board vote on the charters-and-choice proposal, he convened a press conference, surrounded by six civil-rights leaders who endorsed Flores's radical plan. Tom Saenz, national head of the Mexican American Legal Defense & Educational Fund, talked of "parents whose kids are victims of poor schools. There's a level of impatience because of repeated

reforms that have not provided the dramatic change on the quick timeline that the community expects." Or, as one East L.A. parent, Maria Leon, told me, "We need more options." Each charter school "takes only 400 students, and there's a very long waiting list."

The new school year was just getting under way as the board convened to vote on Flores's proposal. At sunup that morning last August, a line of buses snaked around the 28-floor tower that houses the city schools office. Out came 3,000 mostly Latino parents sporting bright yellow and powder blue T-shirts that read, "My Child, My Choice." Villaraigosa arrived to stir the already animated crowd. "We are here to stand up for our children," the mayor shouted, beneath a banner that proclaimed, "Parent Revolution."

Inside, UTLA's Duffy, appearing before the board, was berating Flores. "When all is said and done, you will have sold this district down the road for political gain and for a mayor whose own program has been a dismal failure," he said. But once again, Duffy had overplayed his hand. The board voted 6-1 to approve the reform plan. Los Angeles would now host "the most important charter-school reform market in the country," said Jed Wallace, head of California's charter lobby.

The Twist

It didn't turn out quite that way. For the school year beginning in the fall of 2010, 36 schools on 30 campuses were eligible for takeover, including 12 so-called *focus* schools with lifeless achievement trends, along with 24 newly opened schools. When the takeover plans were tallied in January, far more had arrived from local district managers and teachers than from charter operators (see Figure 1). The schools attracted more than 80 bids in total, about half coming from within the district, including area superintendents, teacher confederations only sometimes involving union activists, and the mayor's own partnership school organization. Charter firms, including Aspire, Green Dot, Alliance for College-Ready Public Schools, and smaller charter operators, put forward one-quarter of the takeover plans, but only one plan was aimed at turning around a chronically low-performing focus school. The *Los Angeles Times* editorial board blasted the charter firms, questioning their commitment to equity. Independent nonprofits submitted the remainder of the proposals.

Few predicted that renegade teachers and grassroots activists would out-bid the established charter firms. The L.A. school board's decision to hand off potentially hundreds of schools had been powered largely by charter school advocates who had won over Flores and Villaraigosa. But now upstart teachers had joined in common cause with neighborhood activists, arguing that even popular charter firms were "outsiders."

Cortines formed an independent panel to review the bids. By February, Villaraigosa's majority on the school board began to unravel. The neutral panel recommended a balanced mix of charter firms, nonprofits, and district educators to take over the 36 schools. But after joining forces with charter comrades to pass the public school choice legislation, neighborhood activists and teachers now split off to fight the charter awards, alleging that charter firms were too imperial and noting fresh statistics that special education students were underrepresented in the charter sector. Over the mayor's and Flores's vocal objections, the board awarded just four schools to charter organizations.

Devil's in the Details

Despite the charter lobby's reversal of fortune, L.A. Unified has become "a network of schools," as Claremont Graduate University professor Charles Kerchner points out. Even before Villaraigosa pushed through public school choice, the district watched over 15 magnet schools with long waiting lists, and Cortines's pilot campuses were showing promising results, at least in terms of decentralizing school management. The 161 charter schools operating within the district's boundaries ranged from fragile mom-and-pop

organizations to those run by franchise firms like the Alliance for College-Ready Public Schools and the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP). The Gates Foundation has begun funneling \$60 million to these big charter players, hoping to boost teacher effectiveness through incentives and training efforts. L.A. may yet become the poster child for Secretary Duncan's \$4.3 billion Race to the Top initiative.

New questions continue to surface from the twists and turns of the L.A. story. How rapidly and responsibly can L.A. Unified hand off as many as 251 schools to charter firms, nonprofits, and breakaway teachers? Will a robust count of charismatic innovators surface in Los Angeles to take over complicated urban schools? "No. 251 schools, no," says charter advocate Wallace. "Most of our organizations are going to be up for taking on one or two schools every other year." This capacity constraint allowed local nonprofits and teacher confederations to compete against charter firms.

The nerve-wracking work of handing off schools began on cue. Matt Hill is Cortines's top aide for crafting the emerging confederation. A total of 219 letters of intent were initially submitted. "It's more than I anticipated in the first year," Hill said. "As far as a jolt to the system, it has been a great process." Yet the major charter firms moved prudently, each bidding on just one or two schools, and favoring the spanking-new campuses rather than attempting to turn around chronically ailing schools.

Teacher groups went after and won most of the schools, with some opting for the pilot model, embracing the idea of autonomy with all the trappings, "except a thin labor contract," Hill said. This model, in which principals are no longer hog-tied by elaborate bureaucratic or confining union rules, proved attractive to teachers eager to take over campuses, but who equate charters with privatization of school management. And the UTLA much prefers flexible labor contracts under the pilot model to charter agreements that freeze out the union.

Parents are confused over their options. "It was so rushed (in this first year) parents didn't really understand what was going on," Hill said. "Empowerment is a relationship," as UCLA law professor Joel F. Handler remarked.

And the story is far from over. The UTLA filed suit in December to block the mayor's entire charter-and-choice program, even as the union helped some teachers to develop school bids. Soon Villaraigosa will be back in court, once again battling his old friends.

The Roots of Reform

Back in 1989, Bill Clinton and his fellow governors first pushed labor to swallow more demanding learning standards and stiff accountability measures, betting this would renew voters' confidence in the schools. The patient responded with

"It was so rushed, parents didn't really understand what was going on."

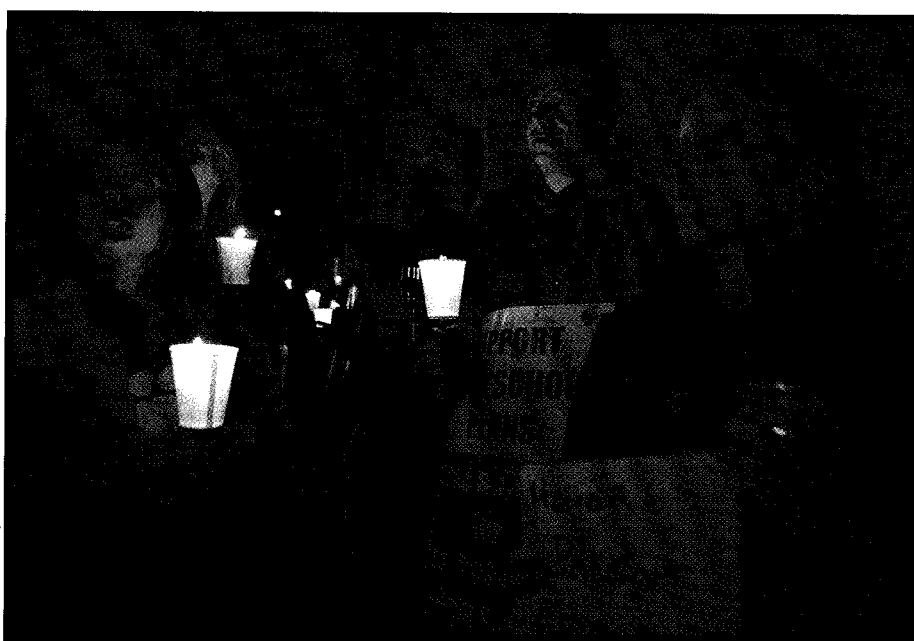
strong vital signs for a time, as test scores climbed in the 1990s and achievement gaps narrowed. Now President Obama is upping the ante, spurring local activists to shake up, even break up, downtown school bureaucracies. "Charters...force the kind of experimentation and innovation that helps to drive excellence in every other aspect of life," the president told the *Washington Post*. His Race to the Top fund sends dollars to states that have lifted caps on charters, offering aid and comfort to urban agitators like Villaraigosa. "The president is demanding innovation, and there are funds out there," as L.A.'s Brenes put it.

Still, Washington's feeding of new charters may fail to lift students until quality climbs. Warm results arrived this past winter in New York City from Stanford University economist Caroline Hoxby, who detailed how students winning slots via lotteries in over-subscribed charters out-performed applicants who remained in regular public schools. Secretary Duncan, up to speed on the national evidence, told me, "I am not for charters. I'm a fan of good charters. Second- and third-rate charters should be closed down." But will Washington nudge states to prune lifeless charter schools after pushing for a major expansion?

Still, the political realignment seen in L.A. narrows the choices available to union leaders: either navigate these treacherous waters more mindfully, or get swept away downstream. "My style is never about being in your face," Duncan said. "[But] do the unions have to move? Absolutely. We all have to get outside our comfort zones."

One unforeseen lesson for Duncan from L.A. is that high-quality charter firms can expand only so quickly. And once the neighborhood-control genie is out of the lamp, managing democratic impulses is difficult, no matter how disciplined the charter lobby. After pushing the school board to cut out several charter bids and go for pilot schools instead, Brenes explained, "Some of our best teachers rolled-up their sleeves and developed quality plans." As for the charter schools? "A lot of folks out there were just not grounded in the community, [they] underestimated our organizing capacity in East L.A."

When the school board finally turned 36 schools over to new management, only four were awarded to charter school



PHOTOGRAPHY / L.A. TIMES

operators. Most of the remaining schools were allocated to the newly formed teacher groups who had greatly strengthened their political position by siding with UTLA against the charters. "We knew from the beginning there was a lot of push back from the unions," said Yolie Flores, one of the two board members who opposed the decision. But Steve Zimmer, one of the members who voted with the majority, said the board had found an appropriate compromise. "There was a lot of pressure from UTLA not to vote for a single charter," he explained.

Of course, the mayor was furious over losing his earlier majority on the board. "We have accountability in our schools, and high-quality charter schools hold themselves to these standards," Villaraigosa said in a statement. "Choosing more of the same reinforces the status quo."

The lesson for Villaraigosa, and fellow mayors committed to charter schools that have shown results, is to remain steadily engaged and forceful politically. When Villaraigosa lost focus, then assumed his board majority would hold tight, reputable charter organizations lost out.

All sides will be back next year for another round of take-over bids. And union leaders may warm up to decentralizing management, even with more flexible labor contracts, especially if they can win control of pilot and autonomous schools by uniting with Latino neighborhood activists.

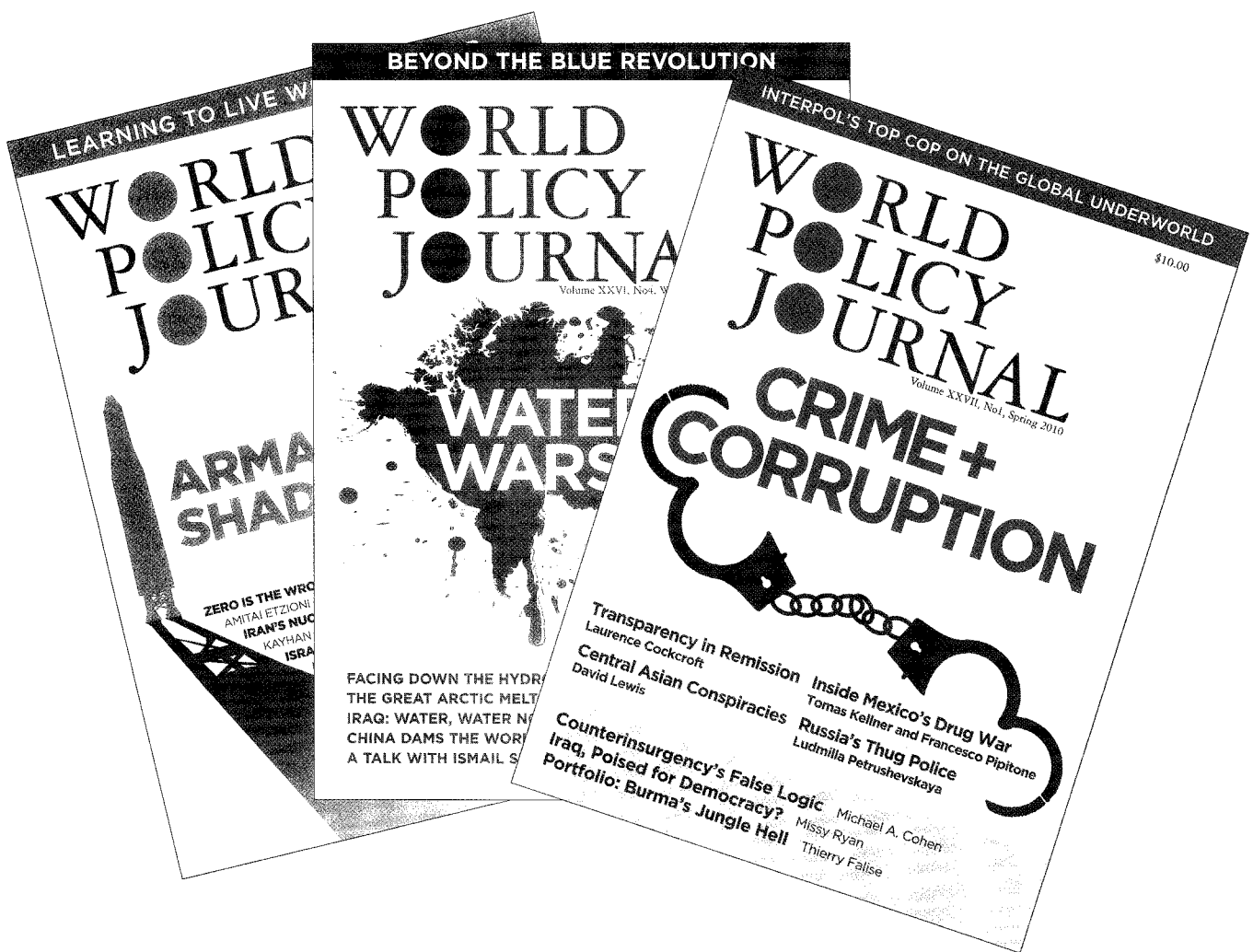
The UTLA's sudden enthusiasm for innovative school management is breathtaking, and largely the work of a young generation of impatient members. Fritch, after helping to win a pilot school with Brenes, put it simply, "We need to become a more progressive union, or we're going to be a done union."

Bruce Fuller is professor of education and public policy at the University of California, Berkeley. His recent book is Standardized Childhood (Stanford University Press). Claire Anderson provided invaluable research assistance.

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A Tiny Slice (Figure 1)

Scholars estimate philanthropic giving to K-12 public education to be less than \$3 billion a year—or less than 1 percent of total spending on the schools.

1%

**Private funding
for education
innovation**



99%

**All other
education funding**



SOURCE: Jay P. Greene, "Buckets into the Sea: Why Philanthropy Isn't Changing Schools, and How It Could" in *With the Best of Intentions: How Philanthropy Is Reshaping K-12 Education*, ed. Frederick M. Hess (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Publishing Group, 2005)



Fueling the

Engine

Smarter,
better ways
to fund
education
innovators

In *Education Unbound*, Frederick Hess, director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute and *Education Next* editor, argues for new education service-delivery organizations that, free from the constricting norms and rules of traditional providers, focus single-mindedly on executing their model. The challenge for reformers is to recognize that enabling such providers is not just a matter of promoting “school choice,” but also of freeing up the sector to a wealth of different approaches and cultivating conditions in which problem solvers can succeed and grow. Hess argues in the selection below that funding is the fuel required for innovators to thrive.

Greenfield is a term of art typically used by investors, engineers, or builders to refer to an area where there are unobstructed, wide-open opportunities to invent or build.

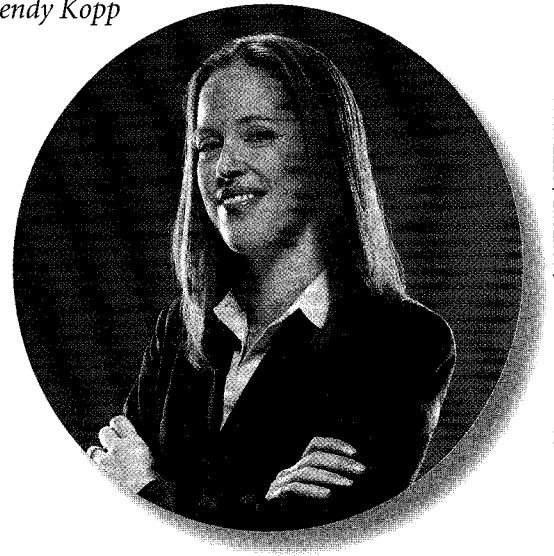
— Chapter 1, *Education Unbound*

New ventures can neither launch nor grow without money. In the absence of funding, greenfield efforts become soul-sucking endeavors for their founders, proceed much more slowly than necessary, or never get off the ground at all. The famous KIPP academies almost died before seeing the light of day because founders Mike Feinberg and David Levin had trouble assembling the few thousand dollars they needed to get started. Raising those funds required the two to write scores of letters and make countless appeals to Houston-area donors. As *Washington Post* reporter Jay Mathews has

by FREDERICK M. HESS

From *Education Unbound: The Promise and Practice of Greenfield Schooling* (pp. 114–125), by Frederick M. Hess, Alexandria, VA: ASCD. © 2010 by ASCD. Reprinted with permission.

ILLUSTRATION / BRUCE SANDERS DESIGN
PHOTOGRAPHY / JAMIE GRILL / ICONICA / GETTY IMAGES



"Mr. Perot agreed to offer us a challenge grant of \$500,000. We would have to match his money three to one. I'm not sure what ultimately led Mr. Perot to this idea. He must have realized that I wasn't planning to go anywhere until he committed to something."

wryly recounted in his colorful history of KIPP, *Work Hard, Be Nice*, "Out of more than one hundred letters, only about a third responded. Most said, in polite corporate language, that they had never heard of KIPP and didn't like the sound of it. None promised money."

Teach For America's Wendy Kopp also struggled to find funding when launching TFA. She has described [in *Public Affairs*] being schooled by Princeton faculty in just how hard it would be to raise the requisite funds, remembering, "What [Professor Bressler] really wanted to know, he said in his booming voice, was how in the world I planned to raise

the \$2.5 million.... He didn't seem convinced. 'Do you know how hard it is to raise twenty-five *hundred* dollars?' he asked."

Kopp has described sitting down with Texas billionaire and former presidential candidate Ross Perot, trying to get that \$2.5 million:

All I remember is Mr. Perot talking. He talked a lot, and I had trouble following much of what he was saying. I was mostly just thinking 'I need to stay here until I get \$1 million from this man.' When Mr. Perot suggested that I contact Sam Walton and other philanthropists

instead, I insisted that he himself was the best possible prospect. Finally, after two hours of back and forth, Mr. Perot agreed to offer us a challenge grant of \$500,000. We would have to match his money three to one. I'm not sure what ultimately led Mr. Perot to this idea. He must have realized that I wasn't planning to go anywhere until he committed to something.

Kopp remembers that Perot's grant was "the catalyst we needed," with other donors following his lead and supplying the remaining funds "in relatively short order."

Only the most hard-headed or selfless of entrepreneurs muscle through. Those with less stomach for frustration, as well as those interested in doing well in addition to doing good, will steer their energies elsewhere. It's

Different Tack (Figure 2)

For-profit and nonprofit enterprises differ sharply in the types of financial support needed.

	Startup	Growth	Sustaining
Corporate Structure			
For-profit	Equity investments from venture capital firms or "angel investors"	Equity investments from later-stage venture capital firms	Revenue from sales of product or service
Nonprofit	Grants from individual donors, foundations, and public sources	Grants from foundations and public sources Program-related investments (loans from foundations)	Continued fundraising for grants Revenue from sales of product or service

SOURCE: Kim Smith and Julie Peterson, "What is Educational Entrepreneurship," in ed. Frederick M. Hess, *Educational Entrepreneurship* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2006)

not just about dollars, though. The impact of venture capital in entrepreneurial hotbeds like Silicon Valley is also a product of the personal networks, mentoring, and expertise that come with it. These networks help new enterprises get a foot in the door, and mentors provide assistance with mundane, but crucial, tasks like organizational bookkeeping, strategic planning, and governance.

Equally crucial is the quality control implicit in venture funding. Those who worry that greenfield efforts may not be publicly run, or who are hesitant to give funds to new ventures with unproven quality, often overlook the fact that competition for venture funding in the private sector comes with intensive screening. In a community like Silicon Valley, as a general rule only 10 percent of business plans that venture capitalists receive warrant any response at all, and only 1 percent are ever funded. To be sure, venture investment also has its share of blemishes. During the late-1990s dot-com bubble, for instance, investors frequently left their skepticism behind as they flocked to a slew of dubious ventures. So, it is not that this process is flawless, but only that it tends to exert a healthy discipline overall.

A particular challenge for schooling is that venture capital is not geographically dispersed. While schools operate in every corner of the country, venture capital is highly concentrated. In 2006, one-third of all venture capital investments were made in California's Silicon Valley. That figure increases to about half of all investments if Los Angeles, Orange County, and San Diego are included, and to three-fourths of all U.S. venture investment if one adds the Route 128 corridor outside Boston, New York, and metropolitan Washington, DC. In other words, about three-fourths of all investment is made in a few California locales and in the Boston-New York-Washington nexus. Given this natural dynamic, we cannot expect 15,000 school districts to become hotbeds of educational entrepreneurship. Instead, the expectation should be that the requisite funding, infrastructure, and networks will likely emerge in some limited number of locales. Greenfielders need to invest in and build these hubs, and then take care to encourage and support the ventures that are able and willing to deliver their services more broadly.

The quality control and support that the investment process provides are driven by investors tending to their self-interest and happen naturally and invisibly in places like Silicon Valley. They impose a certain flexible but hardnosed quality control even while creating an entire ecosystem and equipping promising new ventures to take root. For too long, these quality assurances and development processes have been overlooked by both K-12 reformers who wonder why innovations fizzle and school choice enthusiasts who seemingly expect manicured flowers to spring from a barren, rubble-strewn plain.

What Is Venture Capital?

Crucial money for greenfield ventures is startup funding—the kind of investments that are often referred to in business magazines or popular culture as “venture capital.” Venture capital plays a key role in launching and supporting the firms responsible for innovation and growth in the U.S. economy.

Companies backed by venture capital include many of today's titans, like Intel, Microsoft, Medtronic, Apple, Google, Genentech, Starbucks, Whole Foods, and eBay. In 2007 and 2008, the National Venture Capital Association reports that there were more than 2,400 venture capital deals worth more than \$13 billion in the United States, with the bulk of activity concentrated in knowledge-driven industries like software, biotechnology, medical devices, and energy. One would normally expect to see education comfortably ensconced on a list like that—yet it is nowhere in sight.

Since such funding is largely alien to most individuals involved in K-12 education, it is worth taking a moment to understand how venture capital typically works. What exactly is a venture capital fund? It is typically an investment fund initiated by a group of partners who contribute their own money and then raise additional dollars from outside investors. The partnership agreement specifies both the lifespan of the fund (typically 10 years) and the management fee. As Joe Keeney and Daniel Panko have explained [in Hess, *The Future of Education Entrepreneurship*], “The typical management fee structure is ‘two and twenty’—that is, 2 percent per year of the total capital raised, plus 20 percent of the profits after...100 percent of their invested capital [has been recovered] at the end of the fund's life.” Over those 10 years, venture firms raise funds, pursue promising investments, and eventually exit by selling their stakes.

Given the risks, venture capital investors seek to win big or cut their losses. For this reason, they typically provide only enough funding for a venture to reach the next stage of development, so that it can attract support from those with a smaller tolerance for risk. This need to realize investment returns leads new ventures to focus on becoming successful enough to attract buyers, which involves a private transaction or “going public” and selling shares of stock. And a venture capitalist's aim—to win big on the front end and get out fast once the profit is made—leads venture firms to identify an exit strategy early on.

Only a few foundations are comfortable with taking a risk on entrepreneurial education organizations. Those that do make these early funds available—usually multimillion-dollar grants over the course of several years—tend to be younger foundations.



Susan Dell

The Three Phases of Investment

Though all education entrepreneurs need financing to get off the ground (*venture capital*) and to support expansion (*growth capital*), the capital market for for-profit organizations is markedly different from the one that nonprofit organizations can access (see Figure 2). While for-profit ventures can theoretically rely on their profits, nonprofits rely on a continuous funding stream (*sustaining capital*) even once they mature.

Startup Capital Education entrepreneurs creating for-profit enterprises traditionally raise their initial capital from individuals (“angel investors”) or venture capital firms. As explained in the sidebar, these investors put up cash in exchange for an ownership stake (“equity”) in the new organization, and they expect that their investment will eventually yield a profit.

In 2004, just over \$50 million was privately invested in businesses addressing the Pre-K–12 sector. With success stories like Amazon, Apple, and Google, one might think that

early venture investors typically do quite well for themselves. But the reality is much more complex. In *Fool’s Gold*, Scott Shane, a professor of entrepreneurial studies at Case Western Reserve University, argues that observers focus on fabulously successful entrepreneurs, but what they do not realize is that these success stories are incredibly rare. Only a small number of entrepreneurs are really, really successful—and, by extension, only a small number of venture investors see large returns. The media contribute to this misperception because it is easy to tell the story of Google and of early Google investors, but it is much less interesting and more difficult to write stories about failure.

Nonprofit education entrepreneurs generally raise their startup capital from venture philanthropy firms like NewSchools Venture Fund and the Charter School Growth Fund, or from individual donors and foundations. Only a few foundations are comfortable with taking a risk on entrepreneurial education organizations. Those that do make these early funds available—usually multimillion-dollar grants over the course of several years—tend to be younger foundations, like the Eli & Edythe Broad Foundation, the Milton Friedman Foundation, the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, that

have embraced the modern school of venture philanthropy.

Before the relatively recent emergence of these new foundations, funders tended to provide these early grants in only small increments, forcing entrepreneurs to spend enormous amounts of time and energy on fundraising from multiple donors. In addition, foundation officials found it far more palatable to support a host of small, capacity-building grants than to make concentrated bets on greenfield ventures. Foundation officials rarely get in trouble for failing to have an impact, but can quickly get into hot water for supporting politically contentious measures. For this reason, traditional funders have historically preferred to support professional development, curricular reforms, mentoring programs, and similar efforts that are broadly popular and appear to be risk-free.

Growth Capital For an education entrepreneur, finding startup capital is challenging, but fundraising for growth can be even tougher. For-profit companies that have a good track record may find that venture capital firms such as Quad

BRIAN ACH / WIRE IMAGE / GETTY IMAGES

Ventures are willing to invest in growth for later-stage education organizations with promising early results. Even venture capital firms that don't focus on education are willing to entertain the notion if they see a successful business emerging.

Nonprofits, on the other hand, have a much more difficult time attracting growth funds. They struggle to raise the kind of large, multiyear investments needed to support expansion because even terrific nonprofit ventures cannot deliver a handsome return to investors. In addition, there is a perverse incentive for growing nonprofit organizations: The better the organization is doing, the more likely donors are to drop their support, believing they have done their part or are no longer needed. As such, many foundations seem willing to support strong nonprofit organizations and help them expand on a limited scale, but few are willing to sustain an organization as it grows over time.

It is especially difficult to raise large amounts of funding from foundations because, according to federal regulations, program officers need only spend 5 percent of the foundation's total assets each year in the form of grants and other expenses. Except in unusual cases, the other 95 percent of a foundation's assets are not used to fund grantees but instead are invested for the long term to preserve its endowment. If foundations are to seek a bigger impact, they may need to tap these endowments more aggressively.

One possible strategy for augmenting the available funding relies on *program-related investments*, which are loans that come from endowment funds. Several foundations, including the Walton Family Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, have made program-related investments to help charter school entrepreneurs secure facilities for their schools. There is room for more such investment: According to the Foundation Center, foundations nationwide hold nearly \$500 billion in their endowments, but use just over \$200 million of that for charitable loans or program-related investments—less than one-twentieth of 1 percent.

Nonprofits and philanthropies that have taken on the explicit mission of helping other nonprofits grow include the Growth Philanthropy Network, the Draper Richards Foundation, the Robin Hood Foundation, and the Tipping Point Community. The Draper Richards Foundation, for instance, was founded by famed venture

capitalist Bill Draper and seeks to give nonprofits both management knowledge (a Draper Richards board member sits on participating nonprofits' boards) and capital in their infant stages (\$100,000 per year for three years).

Another foundation that is doing things differently is SeaChange Capital Partners, which makes multimillion-dollar infusions to help established nonprofits grow. SeaChange was founded by Chuck Harris, a retired Goldman Sachs partner. Harris had previously worked with nonprofit organizations and noted a serious problem. He explains [in *Philanthropy News Daily*]:

I was involved with a couple of non-profit organizations that had fantastic management, good results, a fair amount of financial discipline, and were ambitious. And if they had been for-profit businesses at a similar stage of development, they would have gone out and raised a multi-million-dollar, multi-year round of funding tied to their business plan. Instead, they

"Many foundations will not support a grantee for more than a specified number of years, regardless of where the organization is in terms of its growth cycle."

Dan Katzir



THE ELI AND EDYTH BROAD FOUNDATION



SeaChange adopts Wall Street methods to support proven nonprofits with ambitious growth plans. Harris explains the key shift is “seek[ing] to fund the business plans of these nonprofits rather than [to] fund a piece of their program.... We plan to conduct the financing much like a private placement in the business sector.”

were sending out scattershot proposals for relatively small amounts of money over short periods of time. In other words, there was no financial certainty...[and] the most senior people in the organization were spending a disproportionate amount of their time fundraising as opposed to driving the ship. It seemed to me to be a very ad hoc, inefficient, and restrictive way to grow.

SeaChange adopts Wall Street methods to support proven nonprofits with ambitious growth plans. Harris explains the key shift is “seek[ing] to fund the business plans of these nonprofits rather than [to] fund a piece of their program.... We plan to conduct the financing much like a private placement in the business sector, with the goal of raising \$5 million, \$10 million, \$15 million for organizations on the threshold of a growth phase.”

Sustaining Capital Entrepreneurial K–12 ventures launch and grow with private capital or philanthropic support. Once up and running, however, sustainable ventures seek to rely on earned income from fees or the sale of products or services.

However, despite increasing acceptance of income-generating for-profit and nonprofit organizations, few education entrepreneurs have built models that sustain themselves on these revenues alone. And, as Dan Katzir and Wendy Hassett of the Eli & Edythe Broad Foundation have observed [in Hess, *With the Best of Intentions*], “Many foundations will not support a grantee for more than a specified number of years, regardless of where the organization is in terms of its growth cycle.” This means that nonprofits scramble to offset the loss of philanthropic support by finding ways to sell their services or by finding new funders, while for-profits seek to achieve a scale that makes them economically viable. One of the few successful school builders to have addressed this challenge is National Heritage Academies, a for-profit charter operator that enrolls 35,000 students in 57 schools across 6 states and has managed to attain profitability while generating impressive academic outcomes. Even academically successful ventures, however, have found it challenging to mimic NHA’s financial success.

Although some nonprofit education entrepreneurs can support their organization’s ongoing operations through public funding—such as by per-pupil dollars that flow to charter management organizations—most rely, at least in part, on fundraising from individuals and foundations. The limits to this approach are legion, however, as scholars estimate that total philanthropy to K–12 probably amounts to less than \$3 billion a year—or less than 1 percent of all K–12 spending [as shown in Figure 1]. To date, entrepreneurial ventures have been disproportionately funded by this tiny sliver of funding—and especially by funds from younger foundations with roots in the 21st-century economy.

Some leading “new” philanthropies, like the Gates, Walton, and Broad Foundations, have attempted to adapt the venture investment mind-set to the social sector. Funders have begun to weigh criteria like scalability and financial sustainability more heavily, have taken seats on nonprofit boards, and have requested regular performance updates. This marks a shift in thinking—though it’s a development that has also encountered skepticism as to how willing these funders actually are to take bold chances and whether their efforts sometimes cross from smart oversight into micromanagement. What-

Scrambling for Startup Capital

Eric Adler is cofounder and managing director of the SEED Foundation, a grades 7-12 boarding school in Washington, DC, that has won awards from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government and other entities for its astonishing success sending at-risk kids to college. Adler relates how he and cofounder Rajiv Vinnakota struggled to find funding for the initial DC boarding school. At first, Adler explains, "We thought we were going to build a private school."

After a quick survey of boarding program costs and what it would require in terms of annual funding or raising an endowment, however, Adler and his partner concluded that "it was not economically feasible. We would have been talking about many hundreds of millions of dollars of endowment. Or it would have meant raising money hand-to-mouth year after year." Instead, Adler and Vinnakota began looking at nonprofit models in which the government might provide startup capital and then SEED would raise money annually to sustain the school. "You get the slug up front because everyone needs some activation energy and some capital to get going and then after that you raise the money year after year," Adler explains. But, he adds, "We...pretty

quickly concluded that that wasn't going to work, either. Because, again, it was going to involve a level of annual fundraising that just wasn't sustainable."

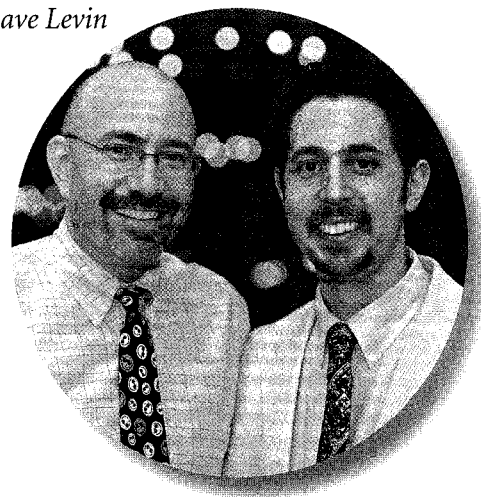
After dismissing those two strategies, Adler wondered, "Could [we] reverse it? Could [we] go to the private sector and get the upfront slug of money in exchange for getting the public sector to promise the operating costs indefinitely?" This led the SEED Foundation to charter schooling. Adler recalls Vinnakota and himself approaching DC and federal officials and saying, "In exchange for the private sector putting up a whole bunch of new facility money, would you be willing, then, to pay the difference between the regular day cost and the boarding cost?" And they were talking simultaneously to philanthropists and private-sector investors, saying, "Yes, we need to raise a bunch of money from you now, and we'll still have to raise some in the first few years while we're getting up to scale. But once we get up to scale, we promise we'll never come back to you saying we won't survive unless [you're willing to provide additional support]." This strategy allowed the SEED Foundation to raise the required \$25 million for the 1999-2003 launch of the school.

ever one makes of such concerns, it is clear that support from philanthropic funders has proven instrumental in launching or expanding heralded greenfield ventures like KIPP, New Leaders for NewSchools, Aspire Public Schools, College Summit, Green Dot, and Achievement First.

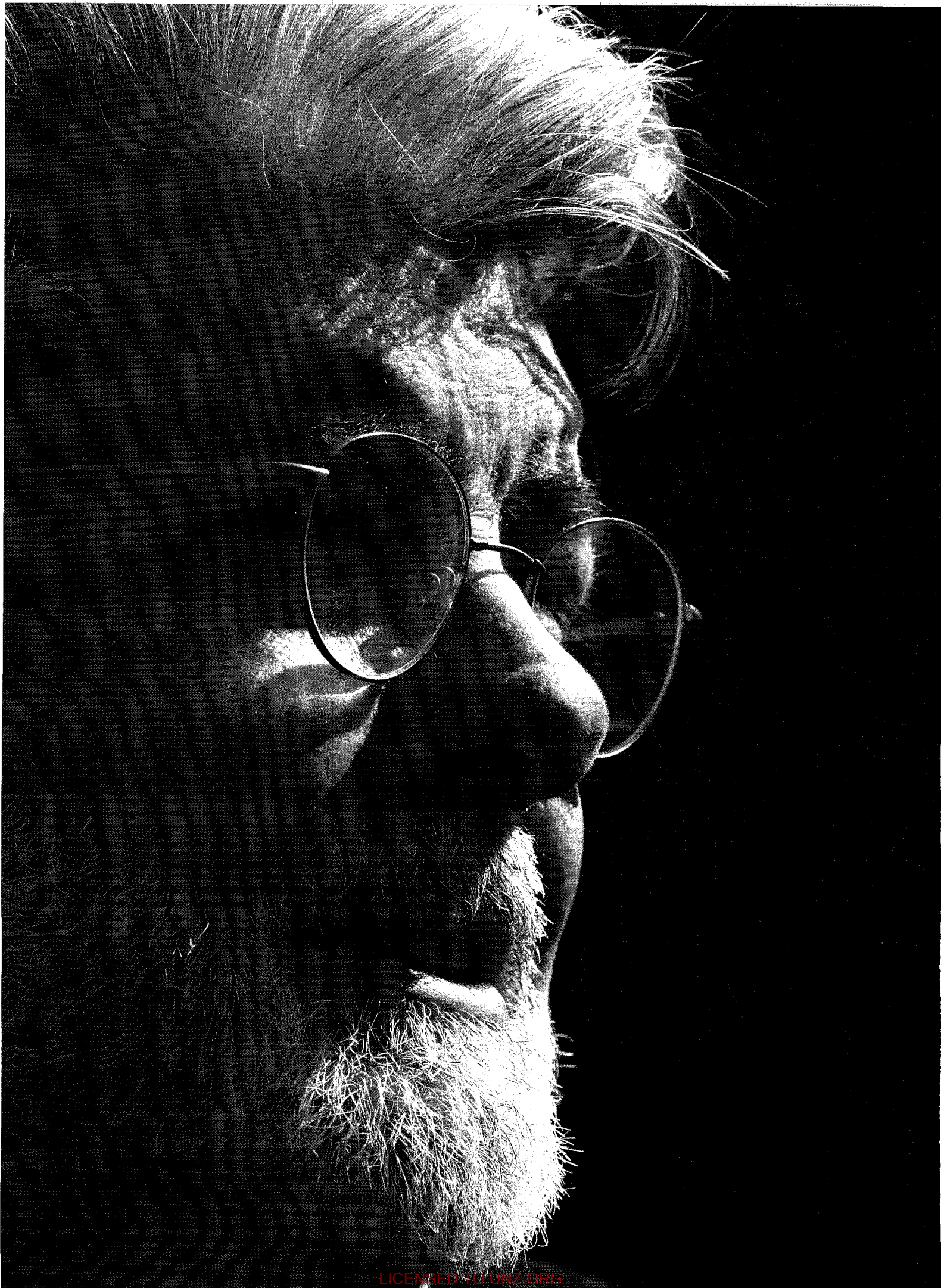
In education circles, the two best-known venture philanthropies may be the decade-old NewSchools Venture Fund and the much younger Charter School Growth Fund. The San Francisco-based NewSchools Venture Fund secures investments from both for-profit and nonprofit sources and then seeks to provide startup capital to ventures—both nonprofit and for-profit organizations—that are sustainable and designed to achieve scale. The Colorado-based Charter School Growth Fund, with over \$150 million in support, provides grants and loans to promote the growth of high-quality charter management and support organizations. These venture philanthropists accept that some investments will fail, so long as the failures are the product of efforts to address hard, important challenges. As the Broad Foundation's Katzir and Hassett have explained, "We do not regard our grantmaking as charity...[but] think of our work as making investments in areas in which we expect a healthy return." ♦

Mike Feinberg, Dave Levin

**It is clear
that support
from
philanthropic
funders has proven
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or expanding heralded
greenfield ventures like KIPP.**



NICHOLAS ALAN COPE



Edutopian

VISION

Teaching, not politics, is the art of the possible.

Teachers are optimists for a living. We believe all students will learn. We believe ignorance is no match for education. We believe in our personal powers of persuasion and influence. The arc of the teacher's universe is long, but it bends toward progress. We believe, in short, in Edutopia.

And Edutopia believes in us.

Let politicians and pundits speak darkly of the need to weed out bad teachers. Let them hold tests and accountability over our heads like the Sword of Damocles. In Edutopia, teachers *rule*. We are confident and inspiring. Enlightened administrators are courageous and brave. Grateful parents swoon, while bright, cheerful students meet their academic manifest destinies as their awesome teachers reject the discredited orthodoxies of industrial-age schooling in favor of hands-on projects and authentic, real-world tasks. In the bright light of Edutopia's soul it is always six o'clock in the morning, and you cannot wait to jump out of bed and get to school.

More seductive than a fitness magazine on New Year's Day, Edutopia inspires me. Edutopia gets me. Edutopia sees the teacher I am capable of becoming—no, the teacher I *will* be—and it wants to help me. True, I haven't helped inner-city high-school students design and build a hybrid car that runs on fuel made from soybeans like that guy in Philadelphia. OK, I haven't nailed down donations to buy an old farm so my students can garden and read Thoreau in the bosom of nature like that teacher in Vermont. Hell, I haven't even found the time for that cool unit where my kids create digital avatars and use them to explore body issues. But I will. Yes, in fact, that's *exactly* what I'm going to do.

Right after the tests are over. It's possible.

Edutopia comes by its name honestly. Beyond aspirational, it is *teacher porn*. But here's the thing: it's serious. The George Lucas Educational Foundation, the 19-year-old organization that runs Edutopia, has given itself a mission to "spread the word about ideal, interactive learning environments

"What Works" according to Edutopia

Edutopia's tagline is "What Works in Public Education." So what works? Edutopia cites six "core concepts" but little proof to back its claims.

Comprehensive Assessment: "We know that the typical multiple-choice and short-answer tests aren't the only way, or necessarily the best way, to gauge a student's knowledge and abilities. Many states are incorporating performance-based assessments into their standardized tests or adding assessment vehicles such as student portfolios and presentations as additional measures of student understanding."

Popular with teachers, portfolios and other forms of "authentic" assessment have proven difficult to implement broadly. A 1995 RAND report on a statewide program in Vermont concluded that portfolio assessment "has been largely unsuccessful so far in meeting its goal of providing high-quality data about student performance."

Integrated Studies: "Creativity, adaptability, critical reasoning, and collaboration are highly valued skills. When it comes to fostering those skills in the classroom, integrated study is an extremely effective approach, helping students develop multifaceted expertise and grasp the important role interrelationships can play in the real world."

Data are hard to come by. A search of "integrated studies" in the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) database yields 71 hits, only 4 of which are peer-reviewed studies.

Project Learning: "Because project learning is filled with active and engaged learning, it inspires students to obtain a deeper knowledge of the subjects they're studying. Research also indicates that students are more likely to retain the knowledge gained through this approach far more readily than through traditional textbook-centered learning."

"Project learning is great when it's done well, but it's very hard to pull off," observes University of Virginia cognitive scientist Daniel Willingham, the author of *Why Don't Students Like School?* "It's probably much worse than other methods when it's done poorly. It just turns into nothing."

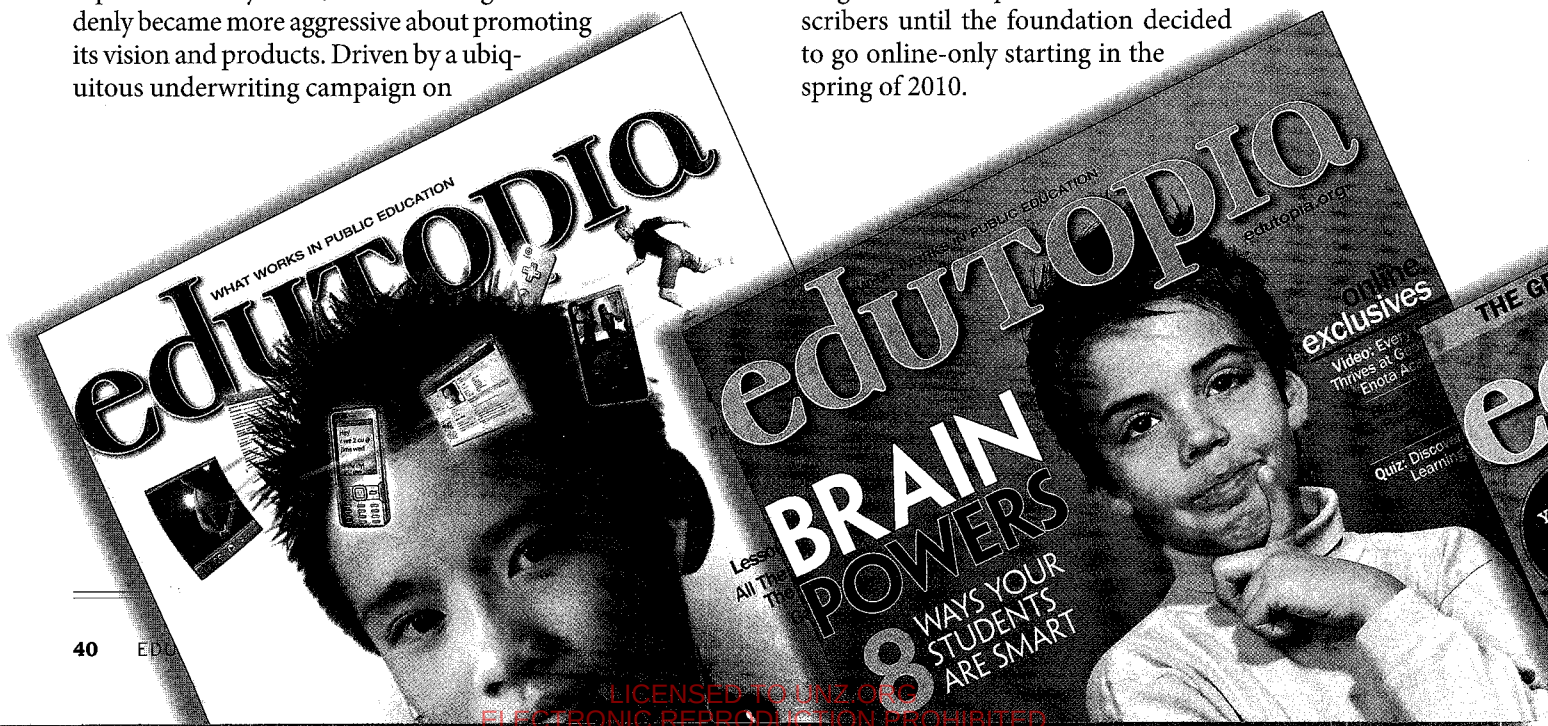
Social and Emotional Learning: "Research shows that promoting social and emotional skills leads to reduced violence and aggression among children, higher academic achievement, and an improved ability to function in schools and in the workplace.... Before children can be expected to unite to achieve academic goals, they must be taught how to work together, and so it provides them with strategies and tools for cooperative learning."

The idea that noncognitive skills can matter as much as IQ for career and life success is most closely associated with psychologist and author Daniel Goleman. Critics say these skills are poorly defined and hard to measure, and that claims about "emotional intelligence" are overblown.

and enable others to adapt these successes locally." Its name notwithstanding, Edutopia does not see itself as peddling pie-eyed idealism.

Many people in education were only dimly aware of Edutopia until early 2009, when the organization suddenly became more aggressive about promoting its vision and products. Driven by a ubiquitous underwriting campaign on

National Public Radio (NPR), Edutopia claims 10,000 paid members and a total monthly audience of over 300,000 educators for its web site and videos, a 70 percent jump in the past year. Its six-year-old bimonthly magazine, *Edutopia*, reached 100,000 subscribers until the foundation decided to go online-only starting in the spring of 2010.



EDUTOPIA PONDISCIO

Teacher Development: *"The best teacher-preparation programs emphasize subject-matter mastery and provide many opportunities for student teachers to spend time in real classrooms under the supervision of an experienced mentor. Just as professionals in medicine, architecture, and law have opportunities to learn through examining case studies, learning best practices, and participating in internships, exemplary teacher-preparation programs allow teacher candidates the time to apply their learning of theory in the context of teaching in a real classroom."*

Teacher training programs that focus on subject mastery are still the exception, and Edutopia's vision of teacher development is one of its stronger pillars. Ironically, it seems to be among the least emphasized of its six core principles.

Technology Integration: *"Effective tech integration must happen across the curriculum in ways that research shows deepen and enhance the learning process. In particular, it must support four key components of learning: active engagement, participation in groups, frequent interaction and feedback, and connection to real-world experts. Effective technology integration is achieved when the use of technology is routine and transparent and when technology supports curricular goals."*

Technology certainly can help "make teaching and learning more meaningful and fun," but more effective? Edutopia doesn't say what research it's alluding to here.

Its unabashed idealism and cheerful optimism make it impossible to dislike Edutopia, which bills itself somewhat grandly as "What Works in Public Education." What's harder to define is Edutopia's on-the-ground impact on America's classrooms and the efficacy of its unique, ultraprogressive ideas. Lucas's money has purchased an impressive collection of reported articles, videos, and web pages gathered on-site at

schools across the country that practice at least bits of what Edutopia preaches. Still, foundation officials are hard-pressed to identify any school that has adopted its strategies as a whole. Thus a better Edutopia tagline might be, "What We Think Would Probably Work in Public Education If Schools Would Stop Being So Old-Fashioned and Just Try It. Plus George Lucas Thinks It's a Good Idea."

That might not make a compelling NPR underwriting credit. But it would be more accurate.

What Works in Public Education?

For Edutopia, "What Works in Public Education" boils down to six "core principles": comprehensive assessment, integrated studies, project-based learning, social and emotional learning, teacher development, and technology integration (see sidebar). Project learning and technology get the biggest push, but even these two favorites serve a bigger picture. "The six core principles can be summarized in six words," says Dr. Milton Chen, senior fellow and executive director emeritus of the George Lucas Educational Foundation. "School life should resemble real life.' That's what we'd really like to see happening in schools."

Edutopia does not consult with schools or districts. It makes no grants. It offers no professional development or teacher training. Essentially, it's a nonprofit media company. "Working for a filmmaker, we make films," says Chen. "And we surround those films with other kinds of information that can support learning about how these innovative classrooms came to be." The foundation has an annual budget of \$6 million and a full-time staff of 18 editors, videographers, and web producers who work out of sleek and modern offices at Lucas's Skywalker Ranch, a 4,700-acre retreat in the Marin County hills near Nicasio, California.

Edutopia's web site of content, plus more than 10,000 pages of videos, podcasts, and webi-seek to redefine what is



possible—even practical—in U.S. schools: Inner-city schools that stress empathy, collaboration, and personal responsibility. Green schools whose smaller carbon footprints reduce absenteeism and improve test scores. Schools where kids work alongside trained chefs to create school lunches made from scratch with fresh ingredients grown in once-abandoned local greenhouses. If these sound like the kinds of schools where you'd like to teach, that's exactly the point. "The reaction we'd like people to have is to say, 'I'd like that for my students,'" says Chen. "Whether I'm a superintendent or a parent, I want that kind of education for my kids.' And then we have to answer the question, how do you do it?"

Let George Do It

George Lucas is an unlikely education philanthropist. The creator of the blockbuster *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* film franchises, Lucas's \$3 billion net worth places him in the top quartile of the Forbes 400 list of the richest Americans, along with Bill Gates, Eli Broad, and members of the Walton family, all of whom are more closely associated with funding education initiatives than Lucas, who by all accounts was a bored, indifferent student growing up amid the farms and factories of Modesto, California.

"There wasn't much as a kid that inspired me in what I did as an adult," he said in a 1999 interview. As a teenager, Lucas spent most of his time under the hood of a car dreaming about automobile racing. He liked photography and briefly entertained the idea of going to art school, an idea shot down by his father, a stationery store owner, who once remarked, "George never listened to me. He was his mother's pet. George was hard to understand. He was always dreaming things up."

A near-fatal car crash days before his high-school graduation had a profound effect on Lucas. "The idea of trying to make something out of my life wasn't really a priority," he said in a 2007 interview with the Academy of Achievement. "But the accident allowed me to apply myself at school." After dabbling in film at Modesto Junior College, Lucas won admission to the University of Southern California's prestigious film school in 1967. USC Film School, said Lucas, "really ignited a passion in me, and it took off from there."

And how. *American Graffiti* (1973) was Lucas's second film and his first hit. That was followed by *Star Wars* (1977),

which became the third-highest-grossing film series in history behind James Bond and Harry Potter. Waiving his director's fee in favor of the licensing rights to the *Star Wars* characters earned Lucas hundreds of millions of dollars from toys, games, and action figures. His Lucasfilm studio, along with Skywalker Sound and Industrial Light & Magic digital-film effects companies made it nearly impossible to go to the multiplex without seeing Lucas's thumbprint. At 47, the age at which Barack Obama won the White House, George Lucas took home the Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award for lifetime achievement in the film industry.

Clearly, boredom and daydreaming have been very, very good to George Lucas. But how did a gearhead kid with little interest in school end up making public education the object of his philanthropy? Chen describes listening to Lucas reflect on his childhood. "He said, 'I know there are many, many students out there like me who are disengaged from school, who are kind of bored, not doing well, who in fact have skills and talents and curiosities. If harnessed they could be really great students.'"

A bit of Hollywood mythmaking could be at work here. Lucas has given mixed messages about his own public education. "Frankly, I was not very engaged in my classes," Lucas said in an e-mail sent to me via Chen. "Occasionally, I had a teacher who would inspire me."

However, he sounded a much more generous note in accepting the Thalberg award at the Oscars in 1992, going out of his way to thank "a group of devoted individuals who, apart from my parents, have done the most to shape my life—my teachers. From kindergarten through college, their struggle—and it was a struggle—to help me grow and learn was not in vain. And it is greatly appreciated."

Edutopia's fixation with hands-on projects and technology is certainly consistent with Lucas's lifelong interest in cars and computers. The source of the foundation's other education touchstones, however, is not as easy to discern. An e-mail request for Lucas to identify his guiding lights in education went unanswered. Members of Edutopia's National Advisory Council, which include teachers, administrators, technology experts, and ed school professors, report little influence of or even contact with Lucas. Who has his ear on "What Works"? "I have heard him talk about Daniel Goleman's emotional intelligence work," says Chen. "Also he has spoken of Howard Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences." Are Edutopia's core principles the fully formed vision of a creative genius and polymath, self-educated in pedagogy? "Those core principles were developed in close communication with Mr. Lucas," says Chen, who insists Lucas is "quite active" in Edutopia's work. "Those are things that George Lucas feels are the linchpins of what he'd like to see in a modern school."

Fair enough. But are those ideas—from wherever they sprang—any good? Are they “What Works in Public Education”?

Back to the Future

For all its earnestness, Edutopia can sometimes give the sense that it has a poor grasp of history. It is forward-looking to a fault. One senior Edutopia executive was genuinely surprised to learn that project-based learning is neither a new or revolutionary concept in education, but one that traces its roots to William Heard Kilpatrick’s 1918 essay “The Project Method.” No obscure figure, Kilpatrick was “the most influential teacher in the nation’s leading college of education,” spending nearly 30 years on the faculty of Columbia University’s Teachers College, notes education historian Diane Ravitch. In her 2000 book *Left Back*, Ravitch describes how progressive educators immediately hailed Kilpatrick’s work and its Edutopian call for “whole-hearted purposeful activity proceeding in a social environment,” as the quintessential statement of the child-centered school movement.

“Kilpatrick thought of the project as not just a method but a fundamental reinvention of education. The project was an activity undertaken by students that really interested them,” Ravitch observed. “Furthermore, it fulfilled Dewey’s demand that education should be ‘life itself’ and not merely a preparation for future living; what could be ‘a better preparation for later life than practice living it now?’”

In other words, Edutopia’s mantra—school life should resemble real life—has a century-old provenance. And while teachers are revered, “school” can be a dirty word in Edutopia. An article titled “Beats the Heck Out of School” describes a project that uses hip-hop to teach students critical thinking, technology, and business skills. “What do you think this is—*school*?” quips a student approvingly in another article about experimental outdoor education. Search “real life” on Edutopia’s web database and you turn up over 200 articles, videos, and blog posts. Search “hands-on” and find 400 more. Somewhere, William Heard Kilpatrick smiles quietly. Dewey, too.

“Project learning is an incredibly important tool. I think there’s ample evidence that it increases student engagement and the ability of kids to retain information,” says Ninive Clements Calegari, a member of Edutopia’s National Advisory Council and the founder of 826 Valencia, a San Francisco education nonprofit. “Every classroom should have old-fashioned multiple-choice tests and good old-fashioned lectures. But if you can engage the kids in a project that has the good tenets of project learning, the impact is more profound,” she says.

Cognitive scientist Daniel Willingham points out that most teachers believe in project-based learning and the methods promoted by Edutopia, yet classroom observation studies show that whole-class instruction and “seat work” account for more than 90 percent of the class time of American 5th

graders. If teachers agree that project-based learning equals good teaching, if it has 100 years of momentum and George Lucas’s millions pushing it, why is so little of it happening in our schools? Teachers “do not yet have widespread support from principals, districts, and states to learn how to implement it,” says Chen. Another possibility is that even those who believe in it do precious little project-based learning because it’s nearly impossible to do well. Willingham points out that teachers, like all human beings, have “cognitive limits.” We can only pay attention to a small number of the stimuli that are competing for our attention at any moment. Small groups

working independently to overcome unforeseen and unpredictable obstacles make effective planning a challenge. “This doesn’t mean that students should never do projects. It means that we should be clear-eyed about the challenges that projects present, and have a plan to meet them,” says Willingham. “Project learning is great when it’s done well, but it’s very hard to pull off,” he notes.

Edutopia is on firmer ground in its technology advocacy, where there is broad agreement on the capacity of technology to transform education, even if there is little consensus on implementation. “When done well, technology can positively impact student learning outcomes. The challenge is that most school systems are not doing it well for a variety of reasons,” says Scott McLeod, an educational technology expert and associate professor at Iowa State University. “The failings have been more in the doing, not the knowing,” adds McLeod, who credits Edutopia with helping schools think through technology implementation and get it

right. “They see excellent and exciting things happening in various isolated locations around the world, tell those stories, and then try to learn and extrapolate from those to schools at large,” he says.

Technology is central to the Edutopian vision, and Chen and his colleagues are unabashed enthusiasts. “Regardless of the politics of human resistance, technology continues to show often a better and less expensive way of doing things,” says Chen. “We feel that corner is being turned in education.”

To its credit, Edutopia seems not to adhere to a rigid orthodoxy in its coverage of schools. Its impressive “Schools That Work” series, in which Edutopia throws all of its multimedia resources into detailed coverage of an individual school, recently featured YES Prep, an urban charter-school network often mentioned in the same breath with KIPP, Achievement First, and other “no excuses” schools championed by advocates of test-driven education reform. The Houston-based schools have extended days, learning contracts signed by students and parents, school-issued cell phones for teachers, and classrooms bearing the names of colleges—the now-familiar features of what David Whitman dubbed “New Paternalism” schools in his 2008 book *Sweating the Small Stuff* (see “An Appeal to Authority,” *features*, Fall 2008). While Yes Prep’s fondness for project learning was highlighted, much of Edutopia’s coverage focused on how to re-create the school’s college-bound culture and tough-love discipline code.

“Story selection is driven first by our core values. For the most part we look for stories in these arenas. Second, we look for innovation and new approaches to reform so as not to become repetitive,” says Edutopia editorial director David Markus. “But in the end, it is about audience. Will the topic and our execution of our coverage plan quench their thirst for new insights and new solutions to improve the learning process?”

“Our core principles are very ambitious compared to where most schools are today,” Chen concedes. “So if a school is doing a great job on two or three of them, that’s a good candidate school for us. It’s very hard, for instance, to find a school that’s really doing the integrated studies piece well. That’s a complete change in the curriculum, certainly at the secondary level.”

Creating Edutopia in U.S. Schools

For all the True Believer energy and aggressive efforts to push an agenda, it remains difficult to discern the impact of Edutopia, either in winning converts to its vision for public education or changing the classroom practice of individual teachers. Most of its staff come from the media world and default to audience metrics as a proxy for influence. “People who use

it feel connected to it and celebrated by it. It is absolutely successful for those individuals,” says Calegari, a former teacher. “When I was in the classroom I felt so isolated. It could have created a community for me of like-minded teachers,” she says.

Unlike fellow eduphilanthropists, Lucas has had little to say publicly about education reform. A private 501(c)(3), Edutopia does not lobby or explicitly advocate policy. “Our main role is to provide our media so that policymakers can be informed about and advocate for the policies behind the schools we cover,” says Chen.

Washington ed policy hands are skeptical whether Lucas’s “What Works” vision can gain the traction it needs to usher in an era of, well, Edutopia. “Gates, Walton, and Broad are driven by theories of action that emphasize structural reform” such as systems, incentives, and measures, says Andrew Rotherham, co-founder

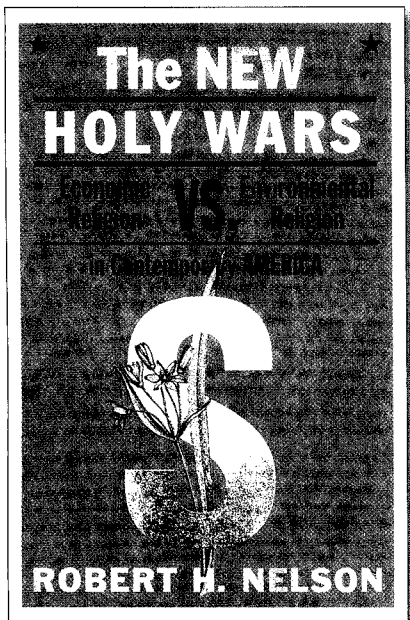
of Education Sector and author of the Eduwonk.com blog. “Edutopia seems more in the camp that what we need are additions and incremental changes to the current system. They’re not nearly as disruptive.” That’s ironic, he quips, “because you have to think that Luke Skywalker would have been more with Gates, Walton, and Broad. He was all about upending an established order that didn’t work.”

Edutopia rejects the comparison. “We consider our core agenda, when implemented at scale, to be very disruptive,” says Chen, who hopes to create more demand for the ideas Edutopia promotes from teachers, principals, parents, businesses, and others. “We leave it to policy experts to create the policies needed to bring them to scale,” he says.

A former 5th-grade teacher, Robert Pondiscio writes about education at the Core Knowledge Blog.

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Questions about the proper relationship between human beings and nature have led to the growth of the public theologies of economics and environmentalism, or secular religions, even while both avoid mentioning their derivation from Western Judeo-Christian sources. So while environmentalists regard human actions to warm the climate, expand human populations, and increase economic growth as immoral challenges to the natural order, economists seek to put all of nature to maximum use for the production of more goods and services and other human benefits.

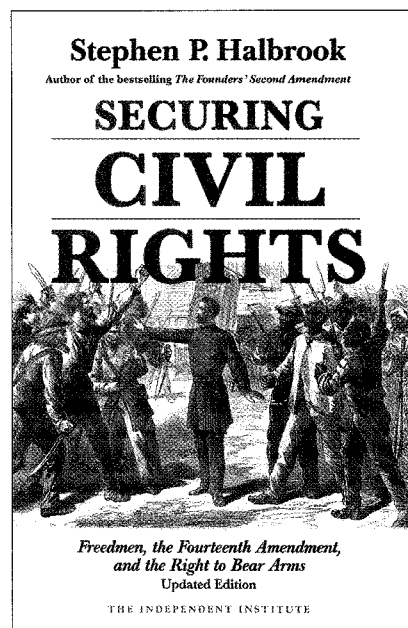
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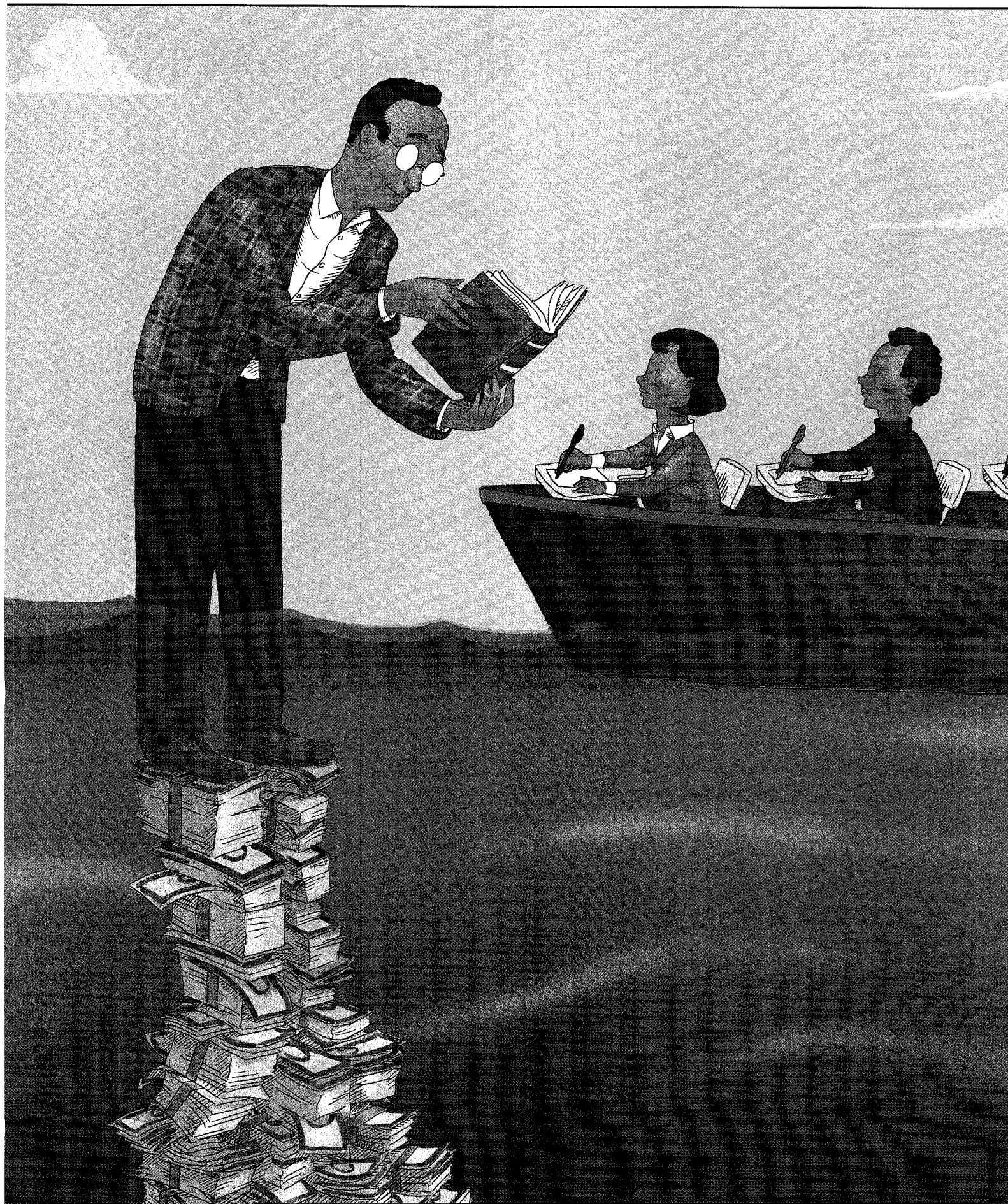
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Kati Haycock



Eric Hanushek

An Effective Teacher in Every Classroom

A lofty goal, but how to do it?

Proposals to reauthorize No Child Left Behind seek to ensure “equitable” access to effective teachers. The U.S. Department of Education’s Race to the Top fund rewards state plans for “ensuring equitable distribution of effective teachers and principals” and for “ambitious yet achievable annual targets to increase the number and percentage of highly effective teachers...in high-poverty schools.” These objectives pose a number of challenging questions. How readily can we identify effective teachers? And, perhaps most crucially, what are promising strategies for seeking to increase the number of effective teachers in high-poverty schools and communities? Addressing these questions are two of the leading authorities on the topic: Education Trust chief Kati Haycock and Stanford University and Hoover Institution economist Eric Hanushek.

Education Next: What is the evidence that inner-city schools are shortchanged on high-quality teachers?

Eric Hanushek: Inner-city schools and especially those serving the most disadvantaged students routinely display unacceptable achievement levels, ones that seal their students off from further education and from good jobs. Coupled with the general finding that effective teachers are the key to a high-quality school, it is natural to infer that the children most in need are systematically getting the poorest teachers.

Unfortunately, direct evidence on the distribution of teacher quality and its impact for disadvantaged

students is hard to come by. Researcher Marguerite Roza and others have produced considerable evidence that teachers in schools serving the most-disadvantaged students have lower average salaries, reflecting in large part the movement of more-experienced teachers away from schools with a higher proportion of minority students and with lower-achieving students. There is also evidence that these schools tend to have more teachers with emergency credentials and without regular certification, although this appears to be declining over time. The problem is that these readily measured attributes of teachers have virtually nothing to do with teacher effectiveness.

Extensive research on teacher quality by me and others suggests that the only attribute of teacher effectiveness that stands out is being a rookie teacher. Teachers in their first three years do a less satisfactory job than they will with more experience.
—EH

Extensive research on teacher quality by me and others suggests that the only attribute of teacher effectiveness that stands out is being a rookie teacher. Teachers in their first three years do a less satisfactory job than they will with more experience. And this has an impact on schools serving highly disadvantaged populations, because the more-experienced teachers who leave these schools are generally replaced with new teachers. The net impact of this on disadvantaged schools is unclear, because there is also some evidence that the experienced teachers who leave these schools are on average not their most effective teachers.

Kati Haycock: No matter what measure of “quality” you look at, poor and minority students—and not just those in inner-city schools—are much less likely to be assigned better-qualified and more-effective teachers. Core academic classes in high-poverty secondary schools are twice as likely as those in low-poverty schools to be taught by a teacher with neither a major nor certification in the subject. The percentage of first-year teachers at high-minority schools is almost twice as high as the percentage of such teachers at low-minority schools. The list of disgraceful statistics goes on and on.

Even if we dismiss traditional measures as imperfect gauges of true teaching quality, new studies employing more-sophisticated measures reveal the same inequitable patterns. When the Tennessee Department of Education analyzed the state’s Value-Added Assessment System—which measures the impact of individual teachers on their students’ tested academic growth—it found that “low-income and minority children have the least access to the state’s most effective teachers and more access to the state’s least effective teachers.” Recently, researchers at the University of Virginia studying teaching practices and learning climate in more than 800 1st-grade classrooms were dismayed to find that lower-income and nonwhite students are much more likely than their counterparts to be placed in “lower overall quality classrooms.”

We also have clear evidence of just how damaging those inequities are. An analysis of

data from Los Angeles found that the impact of individual teachers is so great that providing top-quartile teachers rather than bottom-quartile teachers for four years in a row would be enough to completely close the achievement gap between white and African American students. In fact, attending to this problem is the most important step policymakers can take to address the nation’s long-standing achievement gaps.

EN: Can we get higher-quality teachers to inner-city schools? What strategies are most likely to work? Regulation or incentives?

EH: Historically, the first policy response has been to try writing regulations. When these don’t work, the next response is generally to fine-tune the regulations. Developing regulations that ensure that local districts take appropriate action to deal with the teacher quality problem is not likely to be very successful. First, regulations work best when it is possible to measure precisely the underlying attributes that are important to success. Extensive research shows that commonly measured attributes of teachers, such as more than three or four years of experience, master’s degrees, and even state certification, are not related to effectiveness. In fact, all of the regulations that go into defining what is needed to be a fully credentialed teacher neither screen out bad teachers nor ensure that credentialed teachers are any more effective than uncredentialed teachers. Second, many union contracts in effect in inner cities vest rights to fill any teaching vacancies with senior teachers. New or reworked regulations would have to deal with collectively bargained teacher agreements.

An incentive approach must be the centerpiece of improving teacher quality in urban schools and in the most disadvantaged schools. It is necessary to reward success rather than try to regulate it. Unfortunately, we have little experience with how to structure incentives. Attempts to devise universal incentives from Washington or from state capitols are likely to be quite inefficient if not harmful.

Providing strong incentives is increasingly possible, however, as we develop better information linking teachers to student

achievement, but incentives linked to so-called value-added measures are likely to be a small part of the overall answer. We need to refine the evaluation of teacher effectiveness, and we need to introduce the serious use of evaluations into the schools, evaluations that guide tenure, retention, and pay decisions.

Research that Steve Rivkin and I have done indicates that the largest variations in teacher quality are found within the typical school, and that quality variation between schools is considerably smaller than that found in any given school, including high-poverty schools. The policy implication of this is quite clear. It is not a matter of trying to swap all of the teachers in high-poverty schools with those in suburban schools. It is very much a matter of focusing on student achievement gains and of keeping those teachers who do a good job while eliminating those who are inept. For this, it is more a matter of will, combined with eliminating the rigidities that have been built into teachers' contracts.

KH: We know it is possible to bring high-quality teachers into urban schools from recent efforts in New York City and other districts. The question is whether we will do what is necessary to provide low-income and minority students with the kind of powerful teaching they need and deserve. To solve the problem on a large scale, policymakers will need to think beyond simplistic, false dichotomies like "regulation or incentives" and embrace a robust combination of broad reforms coupled with targeted interventions.

First, we should press forward with efforts to provide education leaders with more sophisticated information on teacher effectiveness, to both maximize the impact of strategies that address distribution and to ensure cost efficiency. Education leaders need to be able to identify the strongest teachers in order to recruit and retain them, and assign them to the students who need their expertise the most. Similarly, they need to be able to identify weaker teachers in order to get them the support they need to join the ranks of effective teachers or to move them out of classrooms if they cannot improve. That is why the Obama administration is using the American Recovery and

Reinvestment Act to insist that states tear down the "walls" that prevent them from linking teacher and student data and come clean on teacher evaluation systems that rate all teachers "satisfactory."

But it will take time to develop richer and more sophisticated measures of true effectiveness. Until then, policymakers should use a combination of the best available measures to analyze teacher distribution, report on it, and act to increase equity. A study in North Carolina found that having teachers with a combination of characteristics and credentials can more than offset the gap in annual learning gains between African American students whose parents did not go to college and white students whose parents did. We need to act on the information we have available, even while we work to create more sophisticated measures.

Next, we need new policies that empower local superintendents and principals to use that information to better recruit and distribute highly effective teachers. Districts can move up timelines for teacher resignations and transfers and give principals in hard-to-staff schools first dibs on new entrants and transfers. States and districts can establish a policy of "mutual consent" that gives principals the right to choose their own teachers. States can take actions to pump up the supply of stronger teachers by using data on the effectiveness of graduates to improve teacher training programs, expanding those that produce strong teachers and shrinking or closing those that do not. States and districts can eliminate seniority-based layoffs, which should consider effectiveness instead, and make it easier to transfer or remove ineffective teachers who cannot improve.

Finally, policymakers need to make these schools much more attractive places to work, including but not limited to improving financial compensation. Effective teachers who choose to work in the most challenging schools often sacrifice pay and professional status. State leaders should reverse that relationship, offering such teachers higher pay, visible respect, strong and supportive principals who provide effective instructional leadership, and opportunities to collaborate in meaningful ways.

An analysis of data from Los Angeles found that the impact of individual teachers is so great that providing top-quartile teachers rather than bottom-quartile teachers for four years in a row would be enough to completely close the achievement gap between white and African American students.
—KH

The best way to identify a teacher's effectiveness is to observe her classroom performance. Most other professions are assessed by performance, including that of doctors, lawyers, accountants, and so forth. Indeed, one definition of "profession" might be an occupation in which one is willing to be judged (and rewarded) according to performance.
—EH

EN: How can we measure teacher quality on an ongoing basis?

KH: Measures of teacher quality should be based primarily on teachers' effectiveness in promoting student learning, but should also consider evidence of classroom teaching practices known to contribute to greater student learning. All states now have at least the raw capacity to use value-added techniques to measure teachers' contribution to their students' academic progress. Where those data are available, they should be front and center in efforts to measure teacher quality. But since the data rely on annual standardized assessments, such analyses will not be available for all teachers. Moreover, since value-added data by themselves do not tell much about why a teacher is more or less effective or how exactly he or she can improve, such "outcome" measures can productively be coupled with new kinds of "inputs" measures, provided the two are strongly correlated.

For example, researchers at institutions such as the University of Virginia, Stanford, and Michigan State and at programs like the Teacher Advancement Program and Teach For America have developed protocols for observing classroom practices and analyzing teaching "artifacts" that produce ratings sufficiently correlated with outcomes. Typically, they use highly specific frameworks and rubrics that describe effective teaching practices, ensure that all evaluators are trained in their use, require multiple classroom observations per year, and employ quality controls to ensure reliability across evaluators. Such systems can help administrators and teachers understand why value-added scores look the way they do and how they can be improved.

Some districts are experimenting with systems that incorporate an even broader range of measures. For example, the evaluation system currently being implemented in Washington, D.C., incorporates a schoolwide value-added measure, a gauge of how much the teacher participates in and contributes to the larger school community, and measures of student growth on instruments other than standardized tests.

EH: We have devoted a lot of research to identifying the attributes of effective teachers,

attributes that might be used for hiring or for policy purposes. This research has not succeeded, leading me to agree that the best way to identify a teacher's effectiveness is to observe her classroom performance. Most other professions are assessed by performance, including that of doctors, lawyers, accountants, and so forth. Indeed, one definition of "profession" might be an occupation in which one is willing to be judged (and rewarded) according to performance.

Research suggests that we can identify effective teachers from the value added to student achievement, although there are limits to the accuracy of doing this. Moreover, Brian Jacob and Lars Lefgren, in the most recent of this research, show that principals reach many of the same conclusions about effectiveness in their evaluations; at least they seem able to distinguish effectiveness in the classroom within broad ranges, i.e., bottom, middle, or top.

The long-run hope would be that we develop both better quantitative measures of a teacher's value added and better subjective evaluations by principals, supervisors, and peers. This approach is unlikely to satisfy a regulatory view of allocation of quality teachers, but if we are truly interested in improving student achievement, we cannot shy away from incorporating performance information of all sorts into our management decisions.

EN: All the evidence says that experience does not affect teacher quality much after the first three or four years, so should we be concerned that the more-experienced teachers leave for different locations?

EH: It is a concern if experienced teachers systematically leave the most-disadvantaged schools, because the first few years tend to be a little ragged. On the other hand, this fact by itself should not be overstated. Among all rookie teachers there is still a wide variation in skill. Take, for example, Teach For America teachers. On average, they start out looking like the typical experienced teacher from traditional training programs (even though TFA teachers will themselves improve with seasoning). More than that, the best and the worst TFA teachers or other rookies in the system

are dramatically different from each other, and the difference is much larger than the performance growth typical for the first few years.

Policies that concentrate on single proxies for skill, like initial years of experience, miss the much larger differences. Yes, if we say we can do nothing about retention related to individual performance levels, it would be good to have more-experienced teachers in the disadvantaged schools. But such a focus overlooks the place where truly large changes are possible.

A policy that simply stabilized movement from these schools would not really accomplish much and might even be counterproductive if no attention were given to actual performance. On the other hand, if we made inner-city schools more attractive places to work and if we developed policies that actively reward high performance by teachers, we would probably get a bonus of lower teacher turnover in our most-disadvantaged schools.

KH: While experience in no way equals effectiveness, we still should be concerned about teacher attrition. Here's why: high attrition rates in high-poverty schools create a "revolving door" environment with more job vacancies which, because such schools have a harder time recruiting teachers, tend to be disproportionately filled with first-year teachers. And experience does matter for inexperienced teachers. As a group, first-year teachers tend to be less effective than those with even a little more experience, and effectiveness tends to climb steeply for any given cohort of teachers until it begins to plateau after a few years. According to research by Eric Hanushek and others, disproportionate exposure to inexperienced teachers contributes to the achievement gap.

Therefore, policymakers should either seek to limit the number of rookie teachers hired to work in high-poverty and high-minority schools or ensure that beginning teachers come from programs or institutions with a proven track record of supplying teachers who are much more effective than average. Then they should track the effectiveness of beginning teachers in those schools over the first few years, offering substantial retention incentives to those who demonstrate high levels of effectiveness—not only salary incentives, but

also career pathways that provide opportunities to exercise leadership while they continue to teach.

EN: *If we force teachers to teach in particular schools, will they just leave for another district, or for an administrative position, or leave education altogether?*

KH: We don't know, since it's never been tried on a large scale. More to the point, I would suggest that this is the wrong question to be asking, as nobody thinks forced reassignments are a good solution and nobody is seriously proposing it. Every once in a while, district leaders become frustrated and make noises about the possibility of forced reassignments. But no large district has done it because they know that it would be met with too much resistance and resentment.

Instead, as district leaders are discovering for themselves, a better solution lies in a creative combination of targeted incentives for teachers and policies that empower administrators and school leaders to recruit and retain effective educators.

EH: Coercion is generally costly, particularly when it violates the expectations of workers. The U.S. military found that the draft was not a good policy, even when it allowed them to get soldiers cheaply. With schools, the situation is more complicated. There are many jobs (including the all-volunteer military) where the employer can establish the right to make specific job assignments, but in general the employer must pay for that ability. Today's urban teachers frequently have a contract that gives the more-experienced teacher certain transfer rights across schools, and changing that provision would generally require bargaining with compensation involving higher salaries or other benefits that the teachers value.

The current contractual arrangements are in many cases overly concerned with teachers' rights and less concerned about student outcomes than is desirable. It would make sense to work toward more assignment flexibility by school districts. But, again, this may be lower priority than simply having more control over retention based on classroom effectiveness.

Policymakers should either seek to limit the number of rookie teachers hired to work in high-poverty and high-minority schools or ensure that beginning teachers come from programs or institutions with a proven track record of supplying teachers who are much more effective than average.
—KH

Pay incentives should be offered only to teachers of proven effectiveness, and a portion should be in the form of bonuses contingent on continuing high performance.
—KH

We have a long track record of regulating that schools should “do good”; of following the current ideas, including simply paying teachers more; and of holding out for the perfect, fully tested alternative. We are left with stagnant achievement results that are especially egregious for poor, inner-city kids.
—EH

EN: If we pay teachers more to teach in inner-city schools, will that really attract the best teachers?

KH: Financial incentives can have a positive impact on teacher distribution, but how much of an impact depends on the size of the incentive and to whom it is being offered. Research from North Carolina suggests that smaller financial incentives can help retain teachers in hard-to-staff schools, but experience in places like Dallas and the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system suggests that incentives need to be fairly large to convince highly effective veterans to transfer and remain there. That shouldn't stop leaders from offering higher salaries for effective teachers who successfully take on more-challenging jobs. But the qualifiers in that sentence are important: Pay incentives should be offered only to teachers of proven effectiveness, and a portion should be in the form of bonuses contingent on continuing high performance.

Policymakers can free up resources by putting a stop to or limiting counterproductive incentives in current salary schedules. For example, they can set a ceiling on the percentage of teacher compensation districts can base on seniority, and they can stop the practice of paying teachers to earn master's degrees, which study after study has shown to have no discernible impact on student achievement.

But higher pay alone might not be enough to solve the problem. Some districts have found that even large financial incentives, in the absence of better working conditions, fail to attract and retain strong teachers in high-need schools. The reason is simple: like any other professionals, great teachers place great value on a positive and supportive working environment characterized by strong leadership and opportunities to collaborate with colleagues.

Rather than being discouraged to know it takes more than money to attract stronger teachers to struggling schools, leaders can leverage that knowledge to devise creative solutions. For example, when recruitment bonuses failed to solve the teacher inequity problem in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools, leaders came up with a comprehensive “Strategic Staffing Initiative.” The district

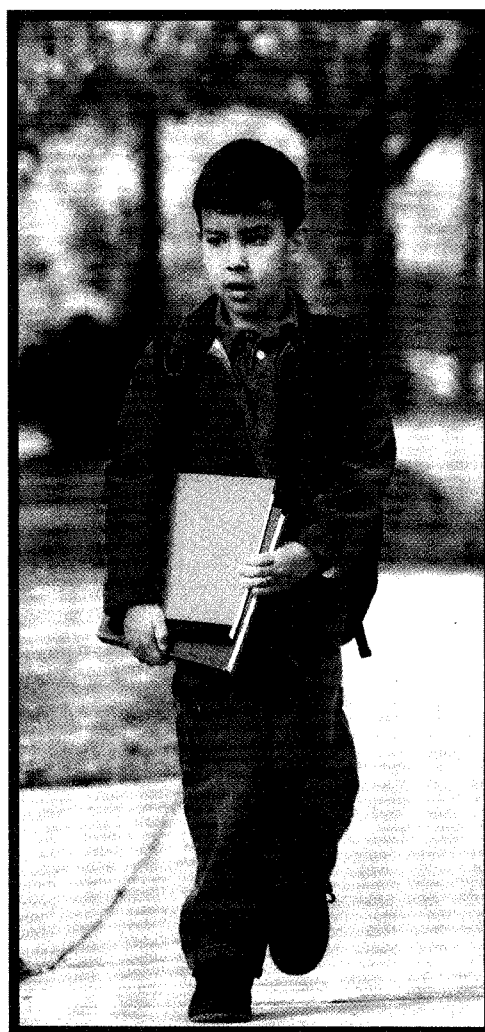
transferred high-performing principals into targeted schools, allowed them to handpick a team of strong administrators, and gave them the opportunity to recruit up to five highly effective teachers from a roster of volunteers identified and recruited by the district. Everyone who transferred received substantial financial incentives, but, just as important, all were offered the opportunity to work with a team of teachers and administrators committed to achieving success.

EH: There is a simple economic axiom that bad teachers like more money as much as good teachers. Providing higher salaries will do little to improve the quality of urban teachers or teachers of disadvantaged students unless this is coupled with a clearer judgment about effectiveness. If the objective is raising achievement, there is no real substitute for observing achievement and taking actions based on it.

School accountability systems move in this direction when the rewards to principals and teachers are linked to the growth in student learning. At that point, higher salaries, if directed toward more effective teachers and administrators, can be effective. But if higher salaries are awarded by geography and not demonstrated effectiveness, there is little reason to expect improvement.

The central message of this discussion must be that improving student outcomes in the inner city cannot be done by proxy. We must use the direct and available information on teacher effectiveness that comes from objective achievement data and subjective evaluations for both administrators and teachers to guide rewards and management decisions. We may conclude that this is too difficult—because of union contracts, traditions, or other issues. In that case, we must be willing to live with disastrous results or, alternatively, be prepared to give parents the real opportunity to choose better schools. We have a long track record of regulating that schools should “do good”; of following the current ideas, including simply paying teachers more; and of holding out for the perfect, fully tested alternative. We are left with stagnant achievement results that are especially egregious for poor, inner-city kids. More of the same will not work. ❖

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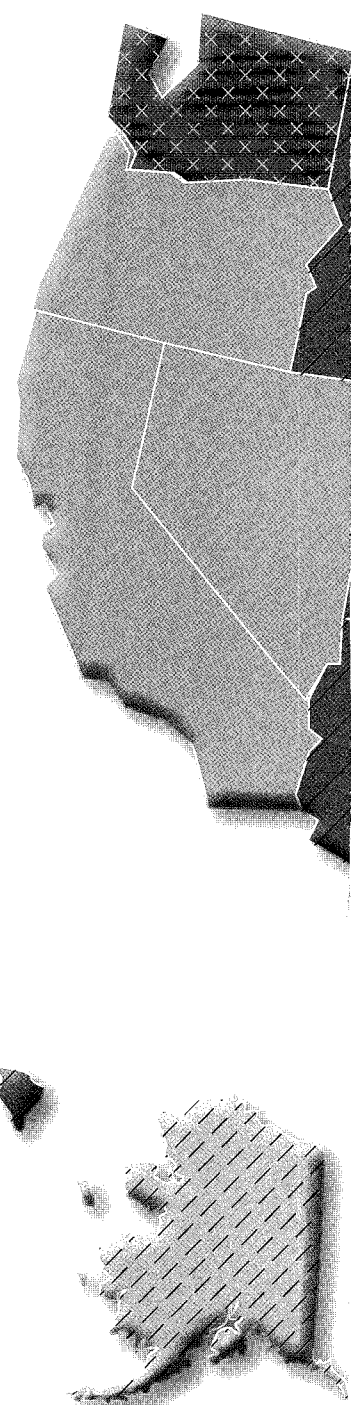
*Accountability has produced substantial gains
in math skills but not in reading*

How has the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act affected student achievement? This is no idle question, as the landmark federal law is long overdue for reauthorization. The Obama administration has recently urged Congress to add the issue to its already crowded 2010 agenda, even going so far as to include an additional \$1 billion for K–12 education in its budget proposal if the law is reauthorized this year (a wholly symbolic gesture, given that it is Congress that sets spending levels, but one that indicates the administration's priorities).

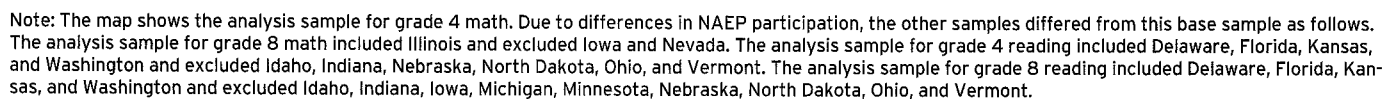
Yet heightened attention to NCLB has not produced consensus over its consequences for students. No Child Left Behind was a reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the central federal legislation relevant to K–12 schooling. NCLB dramatically expanded the law's scope by requiring that states introduce school-accountability systems that applied to *all* public schools and students in the state. NCLB requires annual testing of students in reading and mathematics in grades 3 through 8 (and at least once in grades 10 through 12) and that states rate schools, both as a whole and for key subgroups, with regard to whether they are making adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward their state's proficiency goals. Supporters and critics, in their various approaches to discerning NCLB's impact, share a significant problem: because NCLB applies to all public school students, researchers lack a suitable comparison group and so have been unable to distinguish the law's effects from the myriad other factors at work over the past eight years.

The new research we present below takes on this challenge. Our basic insight is that the test-based accountability provisions that are the defining characteristic of NCLB did not come from nowhere, but rather were modeled quite closely on reforms adopted by many states in the 1990s. For states with such accountability systems in place before 2002, NCLB's most important components may have created some logistical headaches but were largely irrelevant. In contrast, NCLB forced the remaining states to enact accountability systems for the first time. We can therefore estimate the impact of NCLB's accountability mandates by comparing test-score changes in states that did not

By THOMAS DEE and BRIAN JACOB



States that had accountability systems in place in the 1990s were clustered in the South, the West, and the East.



ILLUSTRATION/ BRUCE SANDERS DESIGN

When Did NCLB Begin?

Exactly which academic year we should consider as the first one in which NCLB may have influenced school performance is a potentially important question. NCLB secured final congressional approval and was signed by President George W. Bush in the middle of the 2001-02 academic year. Our preferred approach is to view NCLB as first in effect during the next academic year (2002-03). NCLB is most often characterized as having been implemented during this year, in part because states were required to use testing outcomes from the prior 2001-02 year as the starting point for determining whether a school was making adequate yearly progress (AYP) and to submit draft

"workbooks" that described how school AYP status would be determined. Furthermore, state data collected during the 2002-03 year suggest that states moved quickly to adapt to NCLB's new testing requirements and to introduce school-level performance reporting.

However, one could reasonably conjecture that the discussion and anticipation surrounding the adoption of NCLB would have influenced school performance during the 2001-02 school year. Both major presidential candidates in the 2000 election had signaled support for school-based accountability, and President Bush sent a 26-page legislative blueprint titled "No Child Left Behind" to Capitol Hill within days of taking office

in January of 2001. Alternatively, it could be argued that NCLB should not be viewed as in effect until the 2003-04 academic year, when new state accountability systems were more fully implemented as well as more informed by guidance from and through negotiations with the U.S. Department of Education.

Assuming that NCLB began in 2002, or even 2001, rather than 2003, does not change our main results. However, assuming that NCLB began in the 2003-04 school year yields smaller effects (a statistically significant 0.09 standard deviations in 4th-grade math and a smaller and statistically insignificant effect in 8th-grade math).

have NCLB-style accountability policies in place when the law was implemented to test-score changes in those that did.

We find that the accountability provisions of NCLB generated large and statistically significant increases in the math achievement of 4th graders and that these gains were concentrated among African American and Hispanic students and among students who were eligible for subsidized lunch. We find smaller positive effects on 8th-grade math achievement. These effects are concentrated at lower achievement levels and among students who were eligible for subsidized lunch. We do not, however, find evidence that NCLB accountability had any impact on reading achievement among either 4th or 8th graders.

Assessing NCLB

The broad interest in understanding whether NCLB has influenced student achievement, both overall and for key subgroups, has motivated careful scrutiny of trend data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and other sources. For example, the authors of a report commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES) note that achievement trends on both state assessments and NAEP were "positive overall and for key subgroups" through 2005. Using more recent data, a report by the Center on Education Policy concludes that reading and math achievement as measured by state assessments has increased in most states since 2002 and that there

have been smaller but similar patterns in NAEP scores. Both reports were careful to stress that these national gains are not necessarily attributable to the effects of NCLB.

Other studies have taken a less sanguine view of these achievement gains, arguing that they are misleading because states have made their assessment systems less rigorous over time. University of California scholar Bruce Fuller and colleagues, for example, document a growing disparity between student performance on state assessments and NAEP since the introduction of NCLB and conclude that "it is important to focus on the historical patterns informed by the NAEP." Using NAEP data on 4th graders, they conclude that the *growth* in student achievement has actually slowed since the introduction of NCLB.

Turning to the broader literature on school accountability, several researchers have evaluated the achievement consequences of the accountability systems states developed during the 1990s. One study by Martin Carnoy and Susanna Loeb of Stanford, which was based on state-level NAEP data, found that the within-state growth in math performance between 1996 and 2000 was larger in states with higher values on an accountability index, particularly for African American and Hispanic students in 8th grade. Another study, by Eric Hanushek and Margaret Raymond, both also at Stanford, evaluated the impact of school-accountability policies on state-level NAEP math and reading achievement measured by the difference between the performance of a state's 8th graders and that of 4th graders in the same state four years

earlier. They classified states as having either “report-card accountability” or “consequential accountability.” Report-card states provided a public report of school-level test performance. States with consequential accountability both publicized school-level performance and attached consequences to that performance. Hanushek and Raymond found that the introduction of consequential accountability within a state was associated with increases in NAEP scores.

Both of these studies suggest that NCLB-style accountability provisions may increase student achievement and also demonstrate how state-level NAEP data can be used to evaluate accountability systems. The analysis described below effectively extends this important work to cover the more recent state accountability reforms that were compelled by NCLB.

Research Design

Given the various social, economic, and educational factors at work before and after NCLB was implemented, it is difficult to draw strong conclusions about the policy’s impact from a simple comparison of achievement trends before and after enactment of the law. For example, the nation was suffering from a recession around the time NCLB was implemented, which one might expect would have reduced student achievement in the absence of other forces. At the same time, other national education policies and programs were in place that may also have influenced student achievement.

Perhaps the central challenge in evaluation research is to identify a plausible comparison group that was unaffected by the intervention under study. In the case of NCLB, this is

most distinctly in states that had not previously introduced similar policies.

This strategy relies on the assertion that pre-NCLB school-accountability policies were comparable to NCLB—that is, that the two types of accountability regimes are similar in the most relevant respects. The fact that many state officials criticized NCLB, arguing that it duplicated their prior accountability systems, suggests the functional equivalence of the two sets of policies. To ensure that this is the case and relying on a number of different sources, we evaluated the comparison states according to whether the features of their pre-NCLB accountability policies closely resembled the key aspects of NCLB. We found that they were in fact quite similar.

As an additional check on the validity of our treatment and comparison groups, we used our research design to estimate the impact of NCLB accountability on outcomes that we would not expect to be affected, such as the state-level average poverty rate and median household income. The fact that our method does not find any “effect” of NCLB on such outcomes suggests that these states can serve as a plausible comparison group for isolating the impact of NCLB accountability.

We implement our research design in a more fine-grained manner than simply comparing achievement trends in the treatment and comparison states. We define the treatment as the number of years *without* prior school accountability between the 1991–92 academic year and the onset of NCLB. Hence, states with no prior accountability have a value of 11. Illinois, which adopted its policy in the 1992–93 school year, would have a value of 2. Texas would have a value of

We find that the accountability provisions of NCLB generated large and statistically significant increases in the math achievement of 4th graders and that these gains were concentrated among African American and Hispanic students.

particularly difficult, as the policy simultaneously applied to all public schools in the United States.

We address this issue by comparing trends in student achievement across states that had varying degrees of prior experience with state school-accountability policies similar to those brought about by NCLB. The intuition behind this approach is that NCLB represented less of a “treatment” in states that had already adopted NCLB-like school-accountability policies prior to 2002. To the extent that NCLB-like accountability had either positive or negative effects on measured student achievement, we would expect, once NCLB had been implemented, to observe those effects

4 since its policy started in 1994–95, and Vermont would have a value of 9 since its program began in 1999–2000. This method implies that the larger the value of this treatment variable, the greater potential impact of NCLB. The total effect we report is the impact of NCLB accountability in 2007 for states with no prior accountability relative to states that adopted school accountability in 1997 (the mean adoption year among states that adopted accountability prior to NCLB).

It is important to note that this research design will capture the impact of the accountability provisions of NCLB, but not the impact of other NCLB components such as the

Reading First program or its Highly Qualified Teacher provisions. Additionally, our estimates will identify the impact of NCLB-induced school-accountability provisions on states without prior accountability policies. To the extent that one believes that states that expected to gain the most from accountability policies adopted them prior to NCLB, one might view the results we present as an underestimate of the average effect of school accountability.

Data

This analysis uses data on math and reading achievement from the state NAEP, which offers a representative sample of student achievement in each state at regular intervals. Participation in the state NAEP was voluntary prior to NCLB, although roughly 40 states did participate. NCLB made participation mandatory. The main advantage to using NAEP data for our analysis is that it is a low-stakes exam that is not directly tied to any state's standards or assessments. Instead, NAEP aims to assess a broad range of skills and knowledge within each subject area. Consequently, NAEP data should be relatively immune to concerns about accountability-driven test-score inflation, such as may result from "teaching to the test."

Because our research design depends on measuring achievement trends prior to NCLB, we limit our sample to states that administered the state NAEP at least twice prior to the implementation of NCLB. We include 2002 as a pre-NCLB data point in our analysis because, given the timing of the passage and implementation of the law,

Results

We find that the accountability provisions of NCLB increased 4th-grade math achievement by roughly 7.2 scale points (0.23 standard deviations) by 2007 in states with no prior accountability policies relative to states that adopted accountability systems in 1997. How large is this effect? As one point of reference, consider that the difference between the average scores of 4th and 8th graders in our sample suggests that students gain roughly 12 scale points per year. By this measure, the NCLB impact is equivalent to roughly two-thirds of the average annual gain in scale points. Consider also that the achievement gap between black and white 4th graders on the NAEP math exam is roughly 30 scale points (1 standard deviation), which means that the impact of NCLB is equivalent to about one-quarter of this difference. The effect for 8th-grade math is smaller (0.10 standard deviations) and falls just shy of achieving conventional levels of statistical significance. We find no effects for 4th- and 8th-grade reading.

The design of NCLB necessarily focused the attention of schools on helping students attain proficiency. Figure 2 presents our estimates of the effects of NCLB accountability on the percentage of students achieving at or above the basic and proficient performance levels on NAEP. Although states' definitions of proficient vary widely, very few set the proficiency bar as high as NAEP and most correspond more closely to NAEP's basic performance level. We find that NCLB accountability increased the share of students performing at or above basic in math by 10 percentage points among 4th graders and 6 percentage points among 8th graders. Math proficiency

We do not find that the introduction of NCLB harmed students at higher points on the achievement distribution. Indeed, NCLB accountability seemed to increase achievement among higher-achieving students, if by a smaller amount than it did among their low-achieving peers.

it seems unlikely that spring 2002 scores could have been substantially influenced by NCLB (see sidebar, page 56). All states administered NAEP in 2003, 2005, and 2007.

Our sample includes 39 states for 4th-grade math, 38 states for 8th-grade math, 37 states for 4th-grade reading, and 34 states for 8th-grade reading (see Figure 1). With a few exceptions, our analysis sample closely resembles the nation in terms of student demographics (e.g., percentage African American and percentage Hispanic), observed socioeconomic traits (e.g., the poverty rate), and measures of the levels and pre-NCLB trends in NAEP test scores.

rates among 4th graders also increased by 6 percentage points. Again, however, we do not find consistent evidence that NCLB increased reading performance at either grade level.

Given NCLB's focus on proficiency, one would expect the law to disproportionately influence achievement among previously low-achieving students. Our results showing larger increases in the percentage of students reaching the performance level of basic on the NAEP are broadly consistent with this theory. However, in contrast with some previous research and commonly voiced concerns, we do not find that the introduction of NCLB harmed students at higher points

on the achievement distribution. Indeed, NCLB accountability seemed to increase achievement among higher-achieving students, if by a smaller amount than it did among their low-achieving peers. For example, in 4th-grade math, we find that NCLB increased scores at the 10th percentile by roughly 0.29 standard deviations compared with an increase of only 0.17 standard deviations at the 90th percentile (see Figure 3).

One of the primary objectives of NCLB was to reduce inequities in student performance by race and socioeconomic status. Indeed, this concern drove the requirement that, under the statute, accountability ratings be determined by subgroup performance in addition to aggregate school performance. Hence, it is of particular interest to understand the effect of NCLB accountability on specific student subgroups.

In 4th-grade math, these estimated effects are somewhat larger for Hispanic students relative to white students. Similarly, the effects were substantially larger among students who were eligible for subsidized lunch (regardless of race) relative to students who were not eligible. We also found relatively large effects for black students but only when our analysis weighted the state-year NAEP data by the corresponding enrollments of black students. This pattern suggests that NCLB generated more meaningful improvements in the achievement of black students in states where public schools served larger numbers of black students. The effects were roughly comparable for boys and girls.

In 8th-grade math, we find extremely large positive effects for Hispanic students and small, only marginally significant effects for white students. Unfortunately, the results for black students are too imprecisely estimated to warrant interpretation. The effects for students eligible for subsidized lunch are large and statistically significant. Interestingly, for 8th graders the effects are substantially larger for girls, with boys experiencing little if any benefit of accountability.

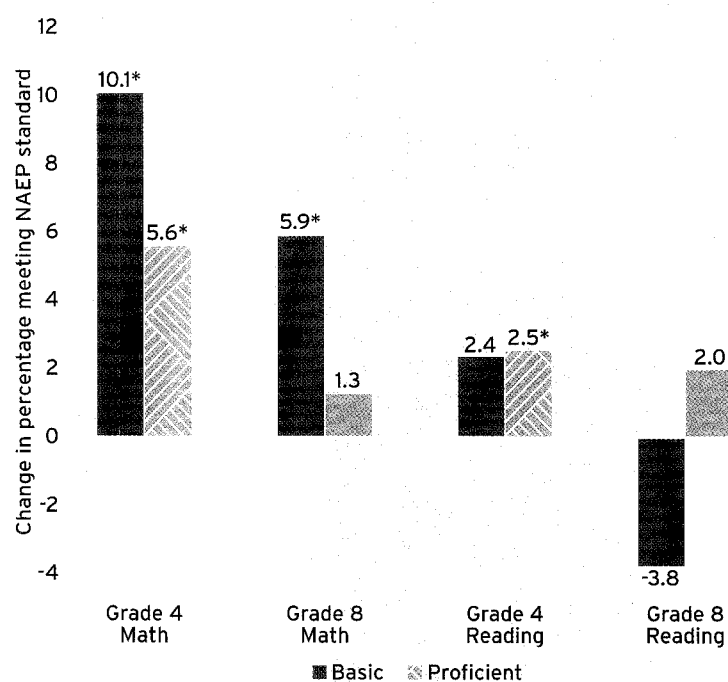
Unintended Consequences?

One concern about NCLB and most other test-based school-accountability policies is that they may cause schools to neglect subjects other than math and reading. NAEP data offer some opportunity to test this hypothesis in the context of NCLB. A sizable number of states administered state-representative NAEP tests in science. Unfortunately, during

our analysis period, the 4th-grade science exam was only administered in 2000 and 2005 and the 8th-grade science exam was administered in 1996, 2000 and 2005. The lack of multiple pre- and post-NCLB measures of student achievement limit the power of our research design. Nonetheless, when we apply our research design to these data, we find no statistically significant effects at either grade level at any point on the achievement distribution. Moreover, we are able to

Clear Boost (Figure 2)

By 2007, NCLB's accountability provisions showed a positive impact on NAEP math, but not reading, scores for both 4th and 8th graders.



* Statistically significant at the 95 percent confidence level

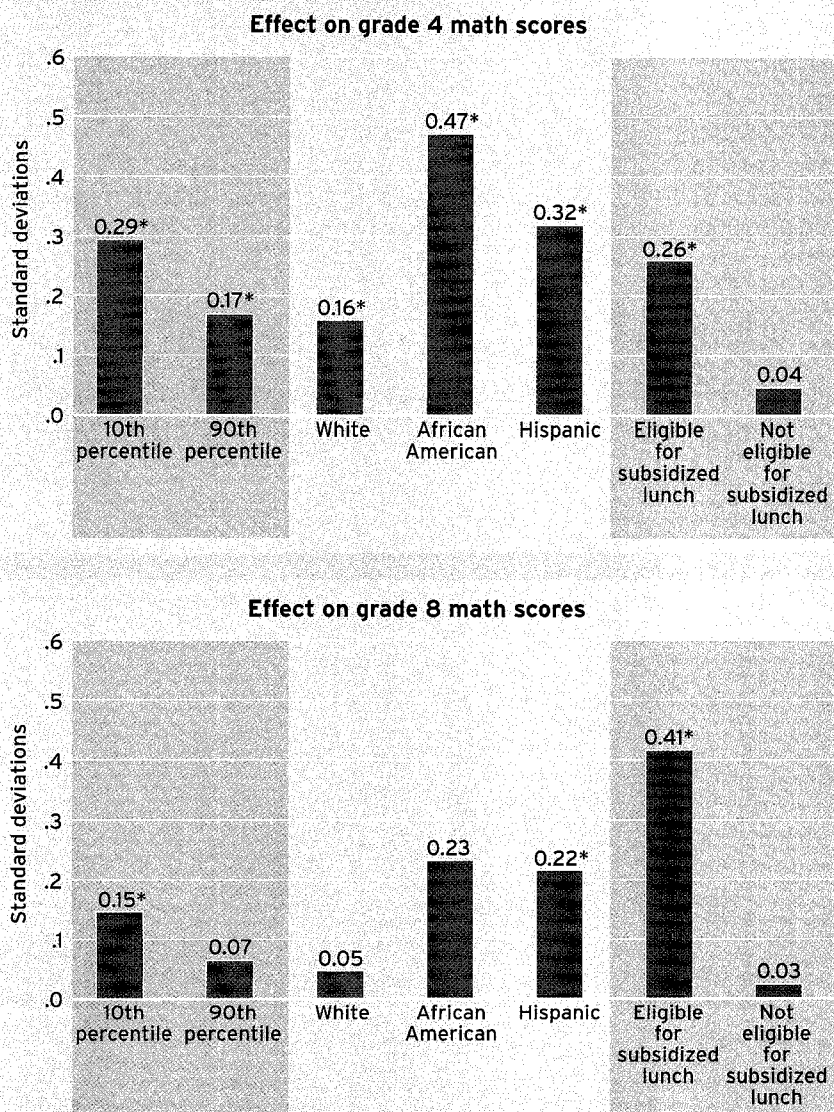
SOURCE: Author calculations

rule out effects larger than roughly 0.10 standard deviations. While these results should be taken with a grain of salt, they cast doubt on some claims that NCLB accountability has had an adverse impact on student performance in science.

Another major concern with test-based accountability, including NCLB, is that it provides teachers an incentive to direct energy toward the types of questions that appear most commonly on the high-stakes test and away from other topics within the tested domain. As noted above, one of the benefits of the analysis presented here is that it relies on

Reaching the Target (Figure 3)

NCLB accountability had the greatest impact on the math scores of African American and Hispanic students and those eligible for subsidized lunch.



* Statistically significant at the 95 percent confidence level

Note: The first two bars indicate effects on students scoring at the 10th and the 90th percentiles.

SOURCE: Author calculations

impact in data analysis and marginally significant effects in number properties and geometry.

The NAEP reading exam measures student competency in several skills related to comprehension: reading for information (i.e., primarily nonfiction reading), reading for literary experience (i.e., primarily fiction reading), and (for 8th grade only) the ability to perform a task (e.g., students apply knowledge from reading bus schedules or directions for repairing something). We find no significant differences in student achievement effects by topic area in reading; that is, NCLB accountability did not appear to have significant effects on student achievement in any of the three reading competencies. Keep in mind, however, that our research design does not allow us to comment on the effects of other aspects of the law, such as the Reading First program, that were explicitly designed to boost reading performance.

Summing Up

So how has NCLB accountability affected student achievement? Our results suggest that its consequences have been mixed. Specifically, we find that the accountability provisions of NCLB generated large and broad gains in the math achievement of 4th graders and somewhat smaller gains for 8th graders. Our results suggest that NCLB accountability had no impact on reading achievement for either group.

The mixed results presented here pose difficult but important questions for policymakers considering whether to “end” or “mend” NCLB. The evidence of substantial and almost universal gains in math is undoubtedly good news for advocates of NCLB. But the lack of any effect in reading, and the fact that the policy appears to have generated only modestly larger impacts among disadvantaged subgroups in math (and thus made only minimal headway in closing achievement gaps), suggests that the impact of NCLB has fallen short of its extraordinarily ambitious goals. Some commentators have argued that the failure of NCLB and earlier accountability reforms to close achievement gaps reflects a flawed, implicit assumption that

student performance on NAEP, which should be relatively immune from such test-score “inflation” since it is not used as a high-stakes test under NCLB or any other accountability system. It is nonetheless interesting to examine whether NCLB accountability has improved student achievement in any particular topic within math or reading. The NAEP math exam measures student performance in five specific topic areas: algebra, geometry, measurement, number properties and operations, and data analysis, statistics, and probability. Our results suggest that NCLB had a positive impact in all math topic areas for the 4th-grade sample. Among 8th graders, NCLB had a moderately large and statistically significant

These results cast doubt on some claims that NCLB accountability has had an adverse impact on student performance in science.

schools alone can overcome the achievement consequences of dramatic socioeconomic disparities.

An effective redesign of accountability policies like NCLB may need to pay more specific attention to the processes and practices operating within schools. Along those lines, it is interesting to note that our evidence of differential effects by grade and subject is broadly similar to the results from evaluations of earlier state-level school-accountability policies. Understanding the sources of these differences is likely to be particularly useful as policymakers discuss the future design and implementation of school-accountability systems. For example, the unique effectiveness of NCLB in improving the math skills of younger students could be related to the biological evidence that cognitive skills are more malleable at early ages. These outcomes may also result

from the specific ways in which schools and teachers have adjusted their instructional practices, perhaps differently for mathematics and reading. Much evidence suggests that school decisions about curricula (e.g., textbooks, instructional software, and the corresponding pedagogy) can have comparatively large effects on student achievement. Further research that can credibly and specifically examine how school and teacher responses have contributed to the achievement effects documented here would be a useful next step in identifying effective policies and practices that can reliably improve student outcomes.

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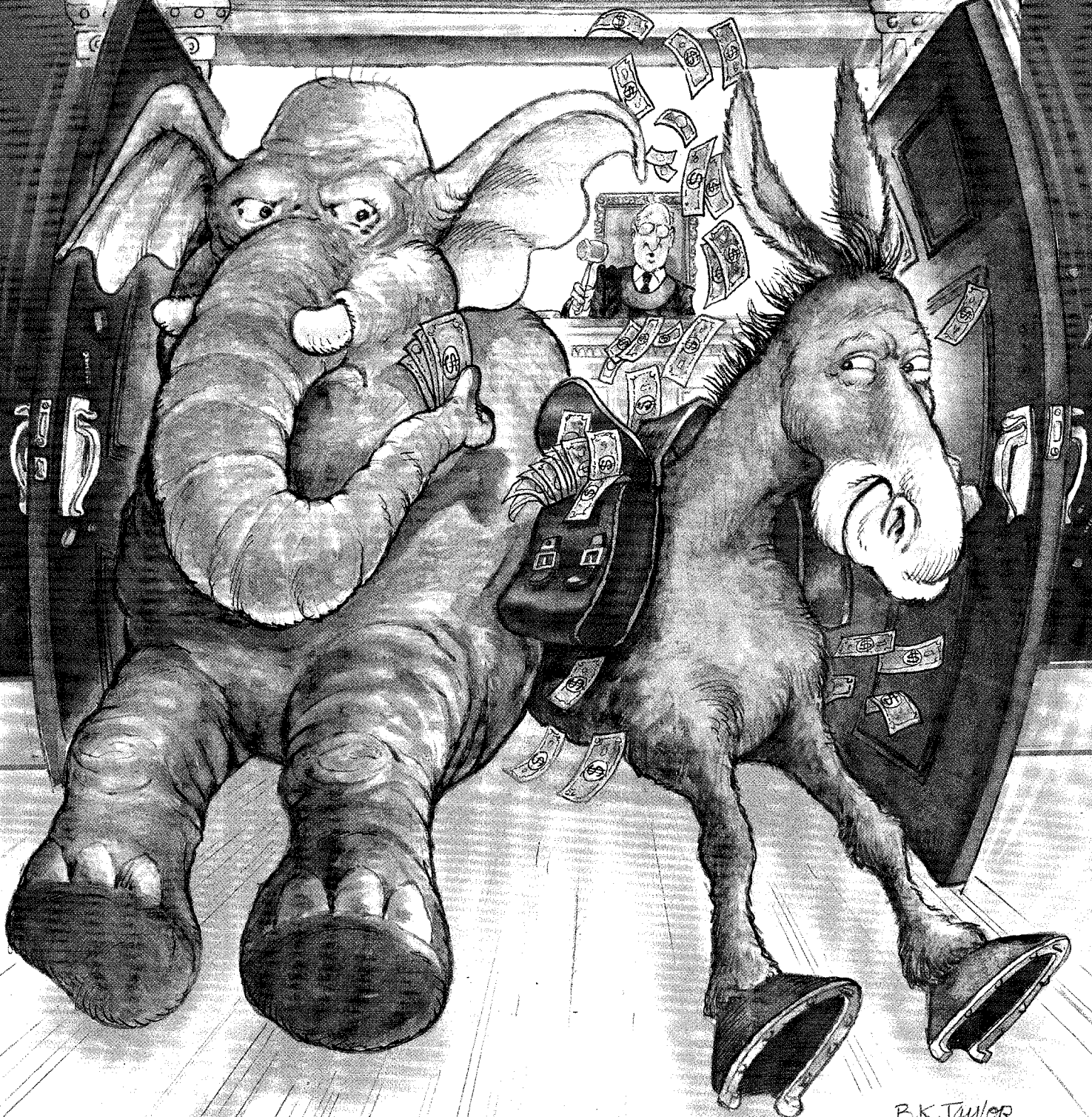
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COURT 185



School-Finance Reform *in* Red and Blue

The constitutionality of state school-finance systems has been under attack for nearly 40 years. Since the California Supreme Court's 1971 ruling in *Serrano v. Priest*, finance-reform advocates have filed 139 separate lawsuits in 45 states. The specific language varies from state to state, but virtually all state constitutions contain education clauses that require the state legislature to provide an "adequate," "basic," or "thorough and efficient" education for all children. Plaintiffs have relied on these provisions to seek increases in the financial resources devoted to public schools, especially those serving disadvantaged students. Courts have in turn deemed school-finance systems unconstitutional in 28 states.

While school-finance lawsuits have attracted significant attention in the legal community and generated numerous state-specific case studies, nationwide analyses of the effects of school-finance judgments (SFJs) have been relatively few. This small pool of studies has produced some common conclusions, namely, that such judgments reduce funding inequality between districts by increasing spending in the poorest districts and that they do so by transferring responsibility for education funding from local to state governments. Some questions remain unanswered, however, such as why SFJs have substantially different effects in different states.

Where the money goes depends on who's running the state

A court's ruling that an existing school-finance system is unconstitutional is only the first step toward funding reform. Some court orders provide instruction for how the legislature should fix the system, but most simply instruct state politicians to redesign the finance system themselves. In either case, the new finance system must garner the approval of the state legislature and governor. In other words, after the court ruling, the reform must pass through the state's usual lawmaking process. States with similar court rulings may end up

By CHRISTOPHER BERRY and CHARLES WYSONG

with very different reforms, depending on how the legislature and governor respond.

With this political process in mind, we decided to investigate how politics might influence the way an SFJ alters a state's school-finance system. Our starting point was estimating the change in per-pupil funding that could be confidently attributed to an SFJ. We did this by comparing changes in funding in school districts where the state's school-finance system has been ruled unconstitutional in a court challenge to funding changes in comparable districts in states where no SFJ has been issued. We studied district-level changes in school funding following 23 school-finance judgments issued between 1988 and 2005. The lawsuits were all related to general education funding, and each was the first SFJ in a state during our period of study. In total, we studied funding outcomes in more than 13,000 districts over 18 years.

What we were most interested to know is whether the change in funding differs if a state has unified Democratic control of the state legislature and the governorship at the time of the court decision, unified Republican control, or when control is divided between the two parties as, for example, when the governor is a Republican and the Democrats control one or both of the houses of the legislature. To find out, we compared the outcomes of SFJs issued in each of these circumstances.

because the government at the time of the ruling is obligated to craft the policy response. Our approach, then, attributes the effect of the SFJ in subsequent years to the party in power when the judgment is made, even if there is a subsequent change in partisan control. We checked the validity of this decision by rerunning our analysis, attributing the funding associated with an SFJ in any given year to the party in control of the state government in that same year. With this method, our estimates of the relationship between partisan control and the effect of an SFJ, in dollars, were much less precise than when we used our preferred approach, although the substantive conclusions of our analysis remained the same. The better estimates lead us to conclude that party control at the time of the court decision has, on average, the most important role in determining the political response to an SFJ.

Table 1 lists the cases used in our analysis and the configuration of partisan control of the state government at the time of the court decision. Only three SFJs were issued during periods of unified Republican government: in New Hampshire, Ohio, and Wyoming. This suggests the need for caution in interpreting our results, especially about the patterns in school finance we see under Republican governments. There were seven judgments handed down during unified Democratic government (in Alabama, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, Tennessee, Vermont, and West Virginia) and 11 delivered

Democratic control results in across-the-board increases in state funding to local school districts, while Republican and divided government regimes tend to produce funding increases targeted to poorer districts.

We found that court-ordered finance reform alters district funding levels under each type of partisan regime. On balance, Democratic control results in across-the-board increases in state funding to local school districts, while Republican and divided-government regimes tend to produce funding increases targeted to poorer districts. SFJs in all three types of political environments lead to a shift in funding responsibility from local to state governments, although to differing degrees.

Which Party is Responsible?

As we began our study, we had to decide how to assign responsibility for school funding changes produced by an SFJ in the years following the judgment, especially when the party that controls the state government changed. We decided to focus on partisan control at the time of the court decision

when government was divided (in Connecticut, Idaho, Kansas, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Montana, North Carolina, New Jersey, New York, South Carolina, and Texas).

State, Local, and Federal Funding

While SFJs require a policy response from the state government, and therefore are expected to have a direct impact on *state* funding, they may also have an indirect effect on funding from local sources. Indeed, one concern over the efficacy of court-induced reforms is that local districts may reduce their own contribution to the schools in response to increases in state aid, thereby undermining efforts to increase total school spending. To provide a more comprehensive picture of the effect of SFJs, we look at the impact on both state and local funding.

Divided We (Often) Govern (Table 1)

Between 1988 and 2000, courts in 20 states asked legislatures and governors to alter their school finance policies. In half of these states, control of state government was divided between the two political parties.

Control of Government	State	Year	Case
Unified Democratic			
	Kentucky	1989	Rose v. Council for Better Education
	Alabama	1993	Opinion of the Justices
	Missouri	1993	Committee for Educational Equality v. Missouri
	Tennessee	1993	Tennessee Small School Systems v. McWherter
	West Virginia	1995	Tomblin v. Gainer
	Vermont	1997	Brigham v. Vermont
	Maryland	2000	Bradford v. Maryland State Board of Education
Divided			
	Texas	1989	Edgewood Independent School District v. Kirby
	Montana	1990	Helena Elementary School District No. 1 v. Montana, as modified
	New Jersey	1990	Abbott v. Burke
	Kansas	1991	Mock v. Kansas
	Idaho	1993	Idaho Schools for Equal Educational Opportunity v. Evans
	Massachusetts	1993	McDuffy v. Secretary
	New York	1995	Campaign for Fiscal Equity, Inc. v. New York
	North Carolina	1997	Leandro v. North Carolina
	South Carolina	1999	Abbeville County School District v. South Carolina
	Minnesota	2000	Minnesota NAACP v. Minnesota
Unified Republican			
	New Hampshire	1993	Claremont School District v. Governor
	Wyoming	1995	Campbell County School District v. Wyoming
	Ohio	1997	DeRolph v. Ohio, as clarified

Note: States with divided control are those in which one party held the governorship and the other party had a majority in at least one house of the state legislature.

SOURCES: For court decisions Peterson and West (2007); for partisan control National Governors Association and the Statistical Abstract of the United States 2007.

Of course, because spending on schools also includes a small amount of federal aid, total funding is not simply the sum of state and local funding. Federal funds, which make up about 10 percent of total education funding, have until recently been limited to specific programs, such as the National School Lunch Program and special education. Thus, we would not expect a state court decision to influence federal funding, an assumption that is borne out in the data.

Gauging the Effects

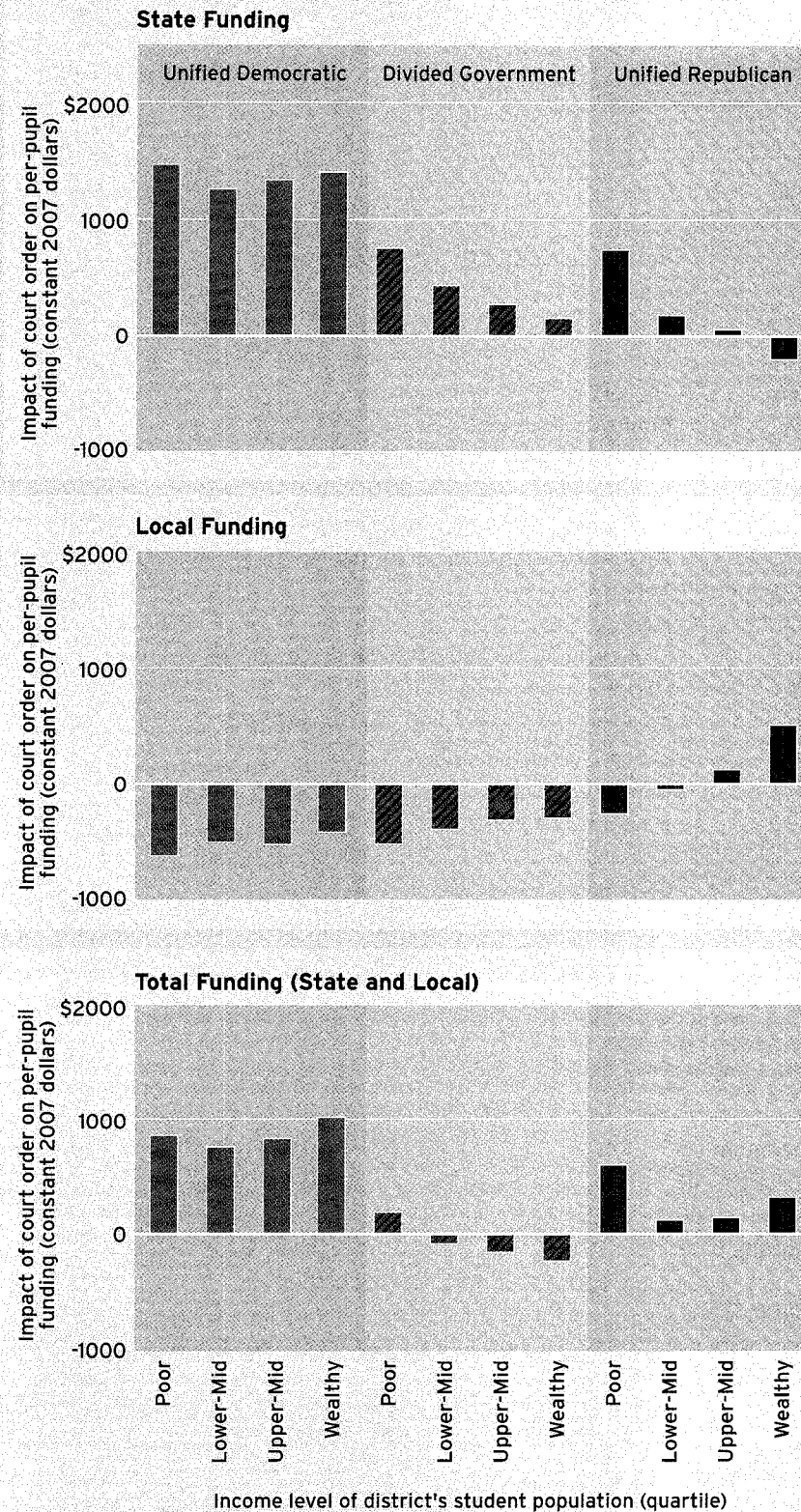
Our basic strategy was to compare changes in funding levels in districts where the state's school-finance system has been ruled unconstitutional to funding changes in comparable districts in states where an SFJ has not been issued. We make these comparisons with groups of districts that had Democratic,

Republican, or split-party control of the state government at the time the SFJ was issued. We allow for a one-year delay for the judgment to take effect because we assume that any changes in policy made as a result of the decision will be reflected in the next year's budget, at the earliest.

Because most school-finance lawsuits are aimed at increasing funding for poor districts specifically, we designed our analysis to measure how the effects of SFJs, and of the party in control of the state government at the time of the decision, might be different for school districts with high rates of students in poverty and for districts where the students are better-off financially. To look for these differences, we divided each state's districts into four quartiles based on the proportion of students living in poverty and allowed for the possibility that the effect of an SFJ, and of one under Democratic, Republican, or divided government, could be different in each quartile.

Partisan Impacts (Figure 1)

Court-ordered finance reform affects school district funding differently depending on the partisan regime at the time of the ruling and the district poverty rate.



SOURCE: Author calculations

To isolate the effects of an SFJ on districts within each poverty quartile, we focus on changes in spending over time within specific school districts after taking into account changes from year to year in average education spending across all of the nation's school districts. Thus we effectively control for unmeasured attributes of each school district that are constant over time and for national trends that affect all districts, such as economic conditions or changes in federal education policy that could have an impact on funding even in the absence of an SFJ. We adjust for inflation by converting all per-pupil funding figures to constant 2007 dollars.

Of course, there are other factors that likely influence changes over time in the level of per-pupil funding in a school district, including characteristics that change over time and influence either their receipt of state funding or the propensity of school districts to raise their own local revenue. We account for the variation in funding that should be directly attributed to the percentage of the student population living in poverty, independent of any change produced by an SFJ. We also include the total number of students in the district, to allow for the possibility that large districts operate differently from small districts. And we estimate the impact on per-pupil expenditure of the proportion of students in a district with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), as students with IEPs generally have special needs that result in higher spending. Finally, we include the proportion of the student population that is African American and the proportion Hispanic. Although we have no reason to believe that these two variables directly cause changes in education funding, they may be correlated with other relevant factors, such as property values or population growth, for which we lack direct information.

In addition to district-specific characteristics, we take into account state-level characteristics that could

influence state funding of education. In particular, we control for the fraction of the state's population over age 65 to account for the possibility that the elderly oppose increases in school spending. We also control for the fraction of the population that is of school age, which captures aggregate demand for educational services. The final control variable in our analysis is per-capita income in the state, as the demand for government services may increase with income.

Annual district-level financial and demographic information comes from the Common Core of Data (CCD), available from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). For years in which CCD data are not available (1988–1992 and 2005), we use data from U.S. Census Bureau Elementary-Secondary Education Finance Survey (F-33). Our analysis considers only local school districts and parts of local supervisory unions with at least 100 students, as identified by the CCD. We exclude Hawaii and Washington, D.C., because each has only one school district.

Additional district demographic information, including the proportion of the population aged 5 to 17 and the proportion of school-aged children living in poverty, comes from the U.S. Census Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates for most years. For 1989 and 2005, the district demographic information comes from the School District Demographics System. Because district poverty

governments, districts with different levels of poverty fare quite differently.

Figure 1 represents our findings graphically. Each bar in the graph represents the effect of an SFJ, that is, the within-district change in spending after the decision, for each category of partisan control and district poverty. We present separate estimates for the change in total funding, in funding from state sources, and in funding from local revenues.

In Democrat-led reforms, our estimates show, districts in every poverty quartile see a shift from local to state funding after an SFJ. Local funding decreases, while state funding increases. This pattern of centralization of school funding is consistent with evidence from earlier studies, which also shows that localities partially offset state efforts to increase overall education spending after SFJs.

The upshot is a net increase in total funding ranging from roughly \$750 to \$1,000 per pupil—a sizable impact, given that total per-pupil funding in our sample is a little over \$9,750 on average. While a few of the differences between quartiles are statistically significant, they are substantively small relative to the overall level of the funding increases. Indeed, if anything, the results indicate that the most affluent districts fare better than the poorest districts, in terms of total funding, when Democrats are in power, although this difference is not statistically significant. We should note here that high poverty does not necessarily imply low

School-finance rulings handed down to divided governments produce decidedly different results. The changes in state funding differ markedly across the levels of district poverty: The poorer the district, the larger the increase.

information is not available for every year, we use the poverty estimates from the closest available survey year. For example, the district poverty estimates for 1996, 1997, and 1998 all use the data from 1997.

Partisan Patterns

A new and very clear picture about the impact of politics on SFJs emerged from our findings. The school-finance reforms implemented by Democratic state governments have substantially different effects on district funding than reforms produced by Republican or divided governments. When a Democratic state government implements an SFJ-induced reform, all districts, poor and non-poor alike, see increases in total funding. Under Republican and divided

spending (in many states, high-poverty districts have the highest spending levels), so our findings here do not bear directly on spending inequality.

School-finance rulings handed down to divided governments produce decidedly different results. State funding increases across the board, but the changes in state funding differ markedly across the levels of district poverty: The poorer the district, the larger the increase in state funding. But, as in states with Democrat-led reforms, SFJs are not unmitigated wins for school-district budgets. All four quartiles see sizable reductions in funding from local sources. These reductions are large enough that the poorest quartile is the only one to see positive net changes in total funding. Overall, divided government reforms appear to represent a more or less straightforward redistribution of funding toward

the poorest districts. The net effects on state education funding appear to be budget-neutral, as we estimate that there is little change in total education funding after an SFJ under a divided government. That said, the net increase of roughly \$175 per student in total funding for poor districts is fairly modest when compared to total per-pupil funding.

Republican-controlled reforms present yet a third pattern of funding changes. Under Republican governments, funding shifts from local to state only for the poorest districts. Districts

the lawsuit filing and decision; and 3) lawsuits do not appear to be precipitated by changes in political regime. Among the 23 cases included in our study, the length of time from the initial filing through the final appellate court decision ranged from less than a year to nine years. On average, the process took four years. Due to the length of time the suits take and the variability of the speed of the adjudication process, advocates could not effectively time their lawsuits to specific political circumstances. In almost half of the cases (11 out of

Republican-led reforms involve centralization of funding for the poorest districts and decentralization of funding for the richest districts.

in the most affluent quartile face cuts in state funding, but they are able to more than compensate for these reductions by increasing local funding. In other words, Republican-led reforms involve centralization of funding for the poorest districts and decentralization of funding for the richest districts. The middle two quartiles are essentially unaffected. On net, both the poorest and the richest districts see increases in total funding, the former courtesy of state aid and the latter financed from their own tax base. Indeed, the richest half of districts in Republican states are the only group under any partisan regime to experience an increase in local funding following an SFJ.

Alternative Explanations

A lingering concern with our results may be that party control of the state government is related to the decision to file a school-reform lawsuit. Finance reform advocates may time the filing of their lawsuits to take advantage of what they view as particularly favorable political conditions. Another possibility is that advocates might resort to litigation only when the legislative and political process fails to provide reform. Either of these possibilities means that SFJs might have effects that appear to be associated with party control but are not actually caused by the response of the party in power.

We answer by first noting that because nearly all states—45 of 50—were subject to at least one education-finance lawsuit, the central issue is not *whether* a state would face a suit but *when*. Beyond that point, we believe that this is not a major concern for three reasons: 1) the amount of time between lawsuit filing and the court decision is often long and always unpredictable; 2) the party in control often changes between

23), the party in control changed between the time of filing and the time of decision. Further, school-finance lawsuits do not appear to be triggered by changes in party control. On average, the party in control in the state was stable for six years prior to the filing of a case. In only three cases did the party in control change in the year of the lawsuit filing, and for each of those three cases, the party in control changed again before the lawsuit was decided.

Conclusion

Which partisan arrangement leads to the best results for poor districts after a school-finance judgment? That question requires stepping into the debate about the relationship between student outcomes and school funding and goes beyond the evidence we present here. What our study does show is one of the many possible ways that politics can influence the implementation of court-ordered school-finance reform. Clearly, reforms implemented by Democrats produce the largest net increases in funding for all students. However, by delivering roughly equivalent funding increases to districts at all income levels, Democrat-led reforms do not target new resources to districts serving poor students. Reforms implemented by divided or Republican governments deliver concentrated benefits to districts serving poor students. In these instances, however, the actual flow of new dollars into poor districts is more meager than when Democrats are in control.

Christopher Berry is assistant professor at the Harris School of Public Policy at the University of Chicago. Charles Wysong is a student at Stanford Law School.

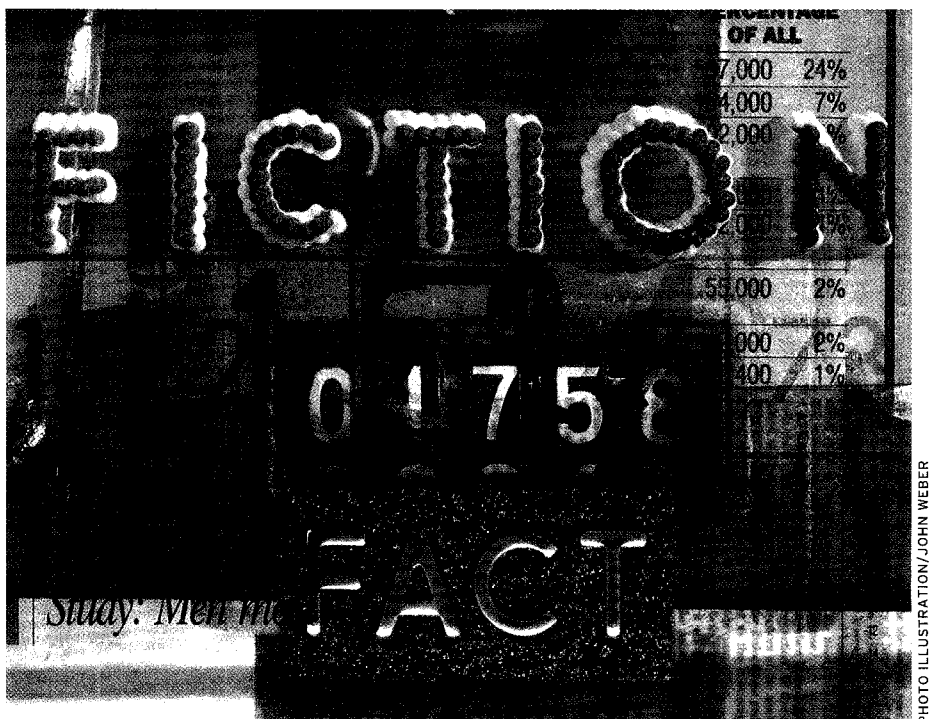
A Closer Look at Charter Schools and Segregation

Flawed comparisons lead to overstated conclusions

By **GARY RITTER, NATHAN JENSEN, BRIAN KISIDA, and JOSHUA MCGEE**

In January 2010, the UCLA-based Civil Rights Project (CRP) released “Choice without Equity: Charter School Segregation and the Need for Civil Rights Standards.” The study intended to report on, among other things, levels of racial segregation in charter schools across the United States. The authors use 2007–08 data from the U.S. Department of Education’s Common Core of Data (CCD) to compare the racial composition of charter schools to that of traditional public schools at three different levels of aggregation: nationwide; within 40 states and the District of Columbia; and within 39 metropolitan areas with large enrollments of charter school students. Based on these comparisons, the authors conclude, incorrectly in our view, that charter schools experience severe levels of racial segregation compared to traditional public schools (TPS).

We will show that, when examined more appropriately, the data actually reveal small differences in the level of overall segregation between the charter school sector and the traditional public-school sector. Indeed, we find the majority of students in the central



cities of metropolitan areas, in both charter and traditional public schools, attend school in intensely segregated settings. Our findings are similar to those in a 2009 report by RAND, in which researchers focused on segregation in five large metropolitan areas (Chicago, Denver, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, and San Diego) — areas that were also included in the CRP report. The RAND authors, with the benefit of student-level data, follow students who move from traditional public schools into charter schools and conclude that these transfers have “surprisingly little

effect on racial distributions across the sites.” The authors of the RAND report write:

Across 21 comparisons (seven sites with three racial groups each), we find only two cases in which the average difference between the sending TPS and the receiving charter school is greater than 10 percentage points in the concentration of the transferring student’s race.

The RAND report, based on a superior methodology, provides strong

evidence that the CRP claims are off base. Their findings, coupled with our own, offer a significantly different portrayal of segregation in charter schools than the CRP report. We find no basis for the allegations made by the CRP authors, who argue that charter-school enrollment growth, based on the free choices of mostly minority families, represents a “civil rights failure.”

While we find fault with the methodology employed by the CRP authors, and with their conclusions, we recognize that the questions addressed by the CRP, in this report and in scores of earlier ones, concern issues of importance for policymakers and the public alike. With the billions of dollars invested each year in public schools, both traditional and charter, and the millions of hours that we compel our children to attend these schools, it is critical that we have a basic understanding of the school environment that we are providing. Moreover, given the history of forced racial segregation in our nation’s schools, we must be ever-attentive to these issues.

Indeed, because these questions are of such significance, it is imperative that they be addressed carefully and correctly.

The Wrong Approach

Unfortunately, the analyses employed in the CRP report do not meet this standard. The authors begin by presenting a great deal of descriptive data on the overall enrollment and aggregate racial composition in public charter schools compared to traditional public schools. Based only on enrollments aggregated to the national and state level, the authors repeatedly highlight the overrepresentation of black students in charter schools in an attempt to portray a harmful degree of segregation. But comparisons of simple averages at such a high level of aggregation can obscure wide differences

in school-level demographics among both charter and traditional public schools. It is like having your feet in the oven and your head in the icebox, and saying that, on average, the temperature is just right.

After this descriptive overview, the authors address the question of racial segregation in a more appropriate way. In this analysis, the CRP authors define as “hypersegregated” any school with a 90 percent minority population or a 90 percent white population. Their

The geographic placement of charter schools practically ensures that they will enroll higher percentages of minorities than will the average public school.

aim is to determine if charter students nationwide are more or less likely to attend school in such hypersegregated environments. However, a critical flaw undermines this comparison and all of the analyses that follow. In every case, whether the authors examine the numbers at the national, state, or metropolitan level, they compare the racial composition of *all* charter schools to that of *all* traditional public schools. This comparison is likely to generate misleading conclusions for one simple reason, as the authors themselves point out on the first page of the executive summary and then again on page 57 of the full report: “the concentration

of charter schools in urban areas skews the charter school enrollment towards having higher percentages of poor and minority students.”

In other words, the geographic placement of charter schools practically ensures that they will enroll higher percentages of minorities than will the average public school in the nation, in states, and in large metropolitan areas. Further, because serving disadvantaged populations is the stated mission of many charter schools, they seek out locations near disadvantaged populations intentionally. Instead of asking whether all students in charter schools are more likely to attend segregated schools than are all students in traditional public schools, we should be comparing the racial composition of charter schools to that of nearby traditional public schools. Employing this method, we could compare the levels of segregation for the students in charter schools to what they would have experienced had they remained in their residentially assigned public schools.

If we acknowledge this standard for valid comparisons, we can quickly dismiss the national and state-level comparisons, which constitute the bulk of the CRP report. According to the authors’ own numbers in Table 20, more than half (56 percent) of charter school students attend school in a city, compared to less than one-third (30 percent) of traditional public school students. Thus, any national comparisons are inappropriate, as these two groups of students are inherently dissimilar. The authors employ this same flawed strategy individually for each of the 40 states included in their analysis. Again, comparing the segregation in charter schools in a state, which are concentrated in heavily minority central cities, to that in traditional public schools throughout the state, reveals nothing about the reality of racial segregation in charter schools.

The examples that the authors draw from these state-level comparisons are

almost humorous at times. For example, consider the following point from page 43 of the report:

In some cases, like Idaho, charter school students across all races attend schools of white isolation: majorities of students of all races are in 90–100% white charter schools.

No kidding! The state of Idaho is nearly 95 percent white. Obviously, this is not a charter phenomenon, yet the authors brazenly use this as evidence for their claims without making any mention of the corresponding figure for the traditional public schools in the state.

Finally, the authors consider the hypersegregation in charter and traditional public schools individually within 39 metropolitan areas. But even within the large Census Bureau–defined Core-Based Statistical Areas (CBSAs) used as proxies for metropolitan areas, charters are still disproportionately located in low-SES (socioeconomic status) urban areas, while traditional public schools are dispersed throughout the entire CBSA. For example, the authors note that in the Washington, D.C., CBSA, 91 percent of students in charter schools attend hypersegregated schools, while only 20 percent of students in that same area attend hypersegregated traditional public schools. A quick look at the geographical placement of charter schools in the D.C. metro area, however, shows why such a comparison is inappropriate. The D.C.

Nearly all of the area's charter schools are in D.C., while the vast majority of the traditional public schools the authors use in their comparisons are located in surrounding states.

metro CBSA contains 1,186 traditional public schools, 1,026 of which are in Virginia, Maryland, and even West

Virginia; only 13 percent of the traditional public schools in the D.C. CBSA are actually situated in the racially isolated District of Columbia. On the other hand, 93 percent of the charter schools in the D.C. CBSA are located in D.C. In other words, nearly all of the area's charter schools are in D.C., while the vast majority of the traditional public schools the authors use in their comparisons are located in the largely suburban or exurban areas of surrounding states. For the 39 CBSAs examined by the authors, only 22 percent of the traditional public schools were located in central cities, compared to 51 percent of the charter schools.

A Tighter Comparison

It is indeed likely that, with the right analysis and the proper questions, the conclusion would not be as clear as portrayed by the CRP authors. We modified

Segregation in Traditional Public Schools (Table 1)

Looking only at traditional public schools (TPS) located within the central city of each metropolitan area reveals much higher levels of hypersegregation than those reported by the Civil Rights Project researchers.

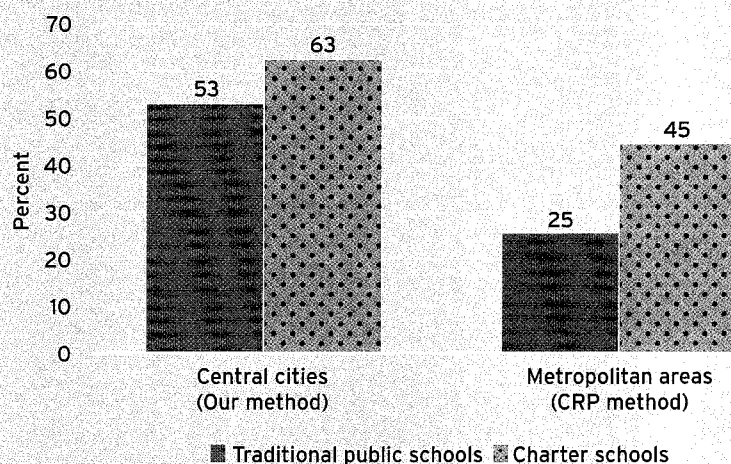
Largest metropolitan areas (CBSAs) in study	Total enrollment (2007–08)	CRP Method: TPS students in hypersegregated schools in metro area	Our Method: TPS students in hypersegregated schools in central city	Difference (percentage points)
New York City, NY	2,683,866	32%	72%	40%
Los Angeles, CA	2,094,763	53	87	34
Chicago, IL	1,591,820	29	77	48
Dallas, TX	1,166,268	23	78	55
Houston, TX	1,121,079	35	68	33
Atlanta, GA	911,285	27	70	43
Philadelphia, PA	857,817	17	65	48
Washington, DC	835,485	20	86	66

NOTE: Hypersegregated schools are those with student populations that are more than 90 percent non-white. Data are student-weighted.

SOURCE: Authors' calculations from the 2007–08 Common Core of Data

The Gap Narrows (Figure 1)

Using our method rather than the CRP method, the share of charter students attending hypersegregated schools is shown to be much less divergent from the share of students attending traditional public schools.



NOTE: Hypersegregated schools are those with student populations that are more than 90 percent non-white. Data are student-weighted.

SOURCE: Civil Rights Project, "Choice without Equity" and authors' calculations from the 2007–08 Common Core of Data

how the CRP method overstates the relative levels of segregation in the charter sector. For example, under the CRP method, 91.2 percent of the charter students in the DC CBSA are in hypersegregated minority schools, as compared to just 20.9 percent of the students in traditional public schools. Using the central-city method, the percentage of students in hypersegregated minority charters stays roughly the same, but the percentage of students in hypersegregated minority traditional publics skyrockets to 85 percent.

In fact, in the vast majority of the 39 metro areas reviewed in the CRP report, the application of our central-city comparison decreases (relative to the flawed CRP analysis) the level of segregation in the charter sector as compared to the traditional public school sector. (To view a table with these figures for all 39 CBSAs, visit www.educationnext.org.) Importantly, unlike the CRP authors, we also compute and present the overall average results. Using the best available unit of comparison, we find that 63 percent of charter students in these central cities attend school in intensely segregated minority schools, as do 53 percent of traditional public school students (see Figure 1). Thus, while it appears that charter students are, on average, more likely to attend hypersegregated minority schools, the difference between the charter and traditional public sector is far less stark than the CRP authors suggest.

The Right Question

Our analysis presents a more accurate, but still imperfect, picture of the levels of racial segregation in the charter sector relative to the traditional public-school sector. Ideally, to examine the issue of segregation, we would pose the question, Are the charter schools that students attend

the CRP analysis by comparing the percentage of students in hypersegregated minority charters within the central city of each CBSA to the percentage of students in hypersegregated minority traditional public schools within the same central city. For example, for the Washington, D.C., CBSA, we included only schools located within the District of Columbia. The data we obtained for this comparison are publicly available from the Common Core of Data, so the CRP researchers could have conducted their analysis at this level. Of course, even this analysis is not perfect. Only following students at the individual level would reveal precisely what effect charters are having on segregation.

We focus our reanalysis on the data presented by the authors in their report, (Table 10). The focal measures in this table are shown in the

last two columns, where the authors present the percentage of charter school students (from the entire metropolitan area) in schools with greater than 90 percent minority students alongside the similar figure for traditional public schools. The problematic figure in this table is the percentage of traditional public school students in hypersegregated schools used as the point of comparison. (See Table 1 above, p.71) which shows the bias entailed for the 8 largest metropolitan areas by the CRP report.

Whether or not we believe that charter schools are more segregated than traditional public schools depends largely on which set of traditional public schools serve as a comparison. The data for these eight very large metropolitan areas, representing more than half of the enrollment for the entire dataset, demonstrate

more or less segregated than the traditional public schools these students would otherwise attend? Unfortunately, our data linking schools to cities do not allow for this analysis.

Even within many of the central cities in the metropolitan areas listed above, there is a great deal of racial segregation. And most available data suggest that charter schools are popping up in areas where the students are poor and disadvantaged and need additional educational options. Public charter schools are simply less likely to open in economically advantaged, mostly white neighborhoods. Thus, even our analysis

Transfers to charter schools did not create dramatic shifts in the sorting of students by race or ethnicity in any of the sites included in the study.

likely underestimates the true levels of racial segregation in the specific traditional public schools that charter students are leaving. Indeed, a more fine-grained analysis (similar to the study conducted by RAND) in which we compared the levels of segregation in public charter schools to that of the traditional public schools in the same neighborhood would be preferable. The RAND report is particularly relevant here because it focuses on student-level data from

Chicago, Denver, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, and San Diego, five metropolitan areas highlighted in the CRP report. By examining student-level transfers, the authors are able to determine the extent to which students move into schools with higher concentrations of their own race and thereby increase the overall level of segregation. Using this strategy, the RAND researchers found,

Transfers to charter schools did not create dramatic shifts in the sorting of students by race or ethnicity in any of the sites included in the study. In most sites, the racial composition of the charter schools entered by transferring students was similar to that of the TPSs from which the students came.

Our own similar analysis of student-level transfers to charters in the Little Rock, Arkansas, area over the past five years tells much the same story. While many of the students transferred into Little Rock charter schools that were racially segregated, these students generally left traditional public schools that were even more heavily segregated.

Conclusion

The authors of the Civil Rights Project report conclude,

Our new findings demonstrate that, while segregation for blacks among all public schools has been increasing for nearly two decades, black students in charter schools are far more likely than their traditional public school counterparts to be educated in intensely segregated settings.

Our analysis suggests that these claims are certainly overstated.

Furthermore, the authors fail to acknowledge two significant truths.

First, the majority of students in central cities, in both the public charter sector and in the traditional public sector, attend intensely segregated minority schools. Neither sector has cause to brag about racial diversity, but it seems clear that the CRP report points its lens in the wrong direction by focusing on the failings of charter schools. As the authors themselves note, across the country only 2.5 percent of public school children roam the halls in charter schools each day; the remaining 97.5 percent are *compelled* to attend traditional public schools. And we know that, more often than not, the students attending traditional public schools in cities are in intensely segregated schools. If we are truly concerned about limiting segregation, then this is where we should look to address the problem.

Second, and perhaps more important, the fact that poor and minority students flee segregated traditional public schools for similarly segregated charters does not imply that charter school policy is imposing segregation upon these students. Rather, the racial patterns we observe in charter schools are the result of the choices students and families make as they seek more attractive schooling options. To compare these active parental choices to the forced segregation of our nation's past (the authors of the report actually call some charter schools "apartheid" schools) trivializes the true oppression that was imposed on the grandparents and great-grandparents of many of the students seeking charter options today.

Gary Ritter is professor of education policy at the University of Arkansas. Nathan Jensen, Brian Kisida, and Joshua McGee are research associates in the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas.

Equal Knowledge

Common curriculum would benefit the poor—and democracy

The Making of Americans: Democracy and Our Schools

By E. D. Hirsch Jr.

Yale University Press, 2009, \$25.00; 261 pages.

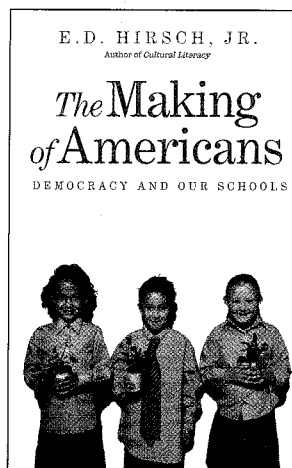
As reviewed by Nathan Glazer

E. D. Hirsch has contributed what is to me the most persuasive idea of the past half century on how to improve the performance of American education. It is a simple idea, but has large implications. These were first spelled out in *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*, in 1988, and explicated further in subsequent works. In his new book, *The Making of Americans: Democracy and Our Schools*, Hirsch presents this simple and powerful idea again. This time it is supplemented with new research, along with a backward look at the ideals guiding the development of American public education and how we have moved away from them in recent decades. Hirsch, a professor of English literature at the University of Virginia—his first books were on Wordsworth and Blake—became interested in the problem of teaching reading to young pupils, who would in time become his students at the college level. Rather than involving himself in the technical question of how to teach reading, he argued that students couldn't become competent readers because they knew less and less of the simple and necessary information that surrounded what they were reading, the context that any writer has to assume is shared by his readers. Hirsch's term for the missing knowledge was "cultural literacy."

His energy in presenting this idea has been matched—surprising in a

tenured professor in a major research university—by the enormous work, with colleagues, of spelling out, grade by grade, in detail, what students must know in a variety of fields if they are to be competent and understanding readers. He gives as an appendix to this new book the "History/Geography thread" of the curriculum developed by his Core Knowledge program for kindergarten and 1st and 2nd grade. It seems remarkably comprehensive and demanding to this reader. Hirsch has also created a system of Core Knowledge schools to teach this curriculum, and a Core Knowledge Foundation for research on American education. He is committed to the value of a common curriculum, which some nations have and which the United States once had, remarkably enough, despite the absence of any dictates to establish it. When so many young students, primarily from disadvantaged homes, move from school to school, a common curriculum would have clear and great advantages in permitting continuity in their education.

"This book," he tells us, "concerns itself...with overcoming low literacy rates and narrowing the achievement gaps between demographic groups but places those themes within the broader context of the founding ideals of the American experiment, which have been a beacon to the world and ourselves." We may hear an echo in these words of a subject that once played a larger role in American education, civics, but Hirsch is rather more concerned with the role



of a common system of public schools in educating a citizenry to the level necessary to maintain a democracy. The founders, as many have pointed out, looked to a common education as one of the strongest supports of the new republic.

Hirsch is well aware of the whiff of conservatism involved in invoking the white male founders and a common curriculum,

and protects himself by invoking the Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci, who argued for the education of the working man to the level of the bourgeoisie if the hegemonic system that maintained capitalism was to be overcome. A common education to a high level is necessary to any effective public action, whether we dub it "Right" or "Left."

A common curriculum is not a necessary implication of "cultural literacy," but it comes into the picture if an entire populace is to be raised to a minimum level of literacy. It is also the best way to avoid one of the most damaging divisions in a society, that between the prosperous and the poor. Hirsch insists that raising the level of achievement in American education will not increase this division, but rather will mitigate it. He notes that in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) assessments, countries "with the highest verbal scores are also the ones that have most effectively narrowed the equity gap between groups of students. The highest achieving countries are Finland, Canada, Ireland, Japan, and

Korea, and these are the very countries that show the least variation in eighth-grade performance between advantaged and disadvantaged students.”

Much of Hirsch’s discussion of what he sees as the decline of American education in the past half century centers on a critique of “progressive” education. Progressive education came in many forms, but one thing has been clear from its origins: those children who did not come from educated and middle-class homes would suffer, because the background knowledge that came from being raised in these homes, of hearing a wider vocabulary and reference to a large range of events, facts, and objects was not available to them, and was also not being taught systematically in progressive schools. This mattered somewhat

less for mathematics, where the home environment provides little foundation: it mattered decisively for reading, and all the subjects dependent on it. This was not the only factor that explained the backwardness of the disadvantaged. But I am convinced, as Hirsch is, that it was an important one.

Hirsch ends his book with a number of photographs: of a standard columned and pediment-fronted American school of the twenties or thirties, of the grand-columned building of the New York State Education Department. Following these images are pictures that will be unfamiliar to most of his readers, but are very familiar to me: the collegiate gothic City College of New York, its Great Hall, and the huge mural of “The Graduate” in it. As an alumnus of City College, I

was touched: why these? Because of the “spirit of aspiration and equality [that] animated the creation in 1847 of the Free Academy (later City College) in New York City. The college’s founder, Townsend Harris, proclaimed: ‘Let the children of the rich and the poor take their seats together and know of no distinction save that of industry, good conduct and intellect...’” Hirsch makes clear with this conclusion that he is promoting his great idea, whatever its conservative implications, primarily to advance the interests of our democracy, by raising the level of competence and facilitating greater equality.

Nathan Glazer is professor emeritus of sociology and education at Harvard University.

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Look in the Mirror

We have the schools we wanted, and now we can't change them

Making the Grade: The Economic Evolution of American School Districts

by William A. Fischel

University of Chicago Press, 2009, \$55;
304 pages.

As reviewed by Jay P. Greene

How did American schools come to be structured as they are, with age-graded schools in relatively autonomous school districts and school calendars that begin in August and end in June? Look in the mirror, suggests William A. Fischel in his highly readable new book, *Making the Grade*. Schools evolved into the current system because we—homeowners nationwide—wanted it that way. As Fischel puts it, “local voters, not state authorities, are responsible for the creation of the system. Educational leaders such as Horace Mann headed parades that proceeded on routes selected by the marchers, not the grand marshal.”

Fischel’s approach differs from most histories of the American school system. In other accounts, the school system developed in response to elite preferences about how it should be structured. In those tellings, the grand marshal led the parade. Pronouncements from a series of blue-ribbon commission reports and hard-charging education leaders swayed legislators to reshape schools.

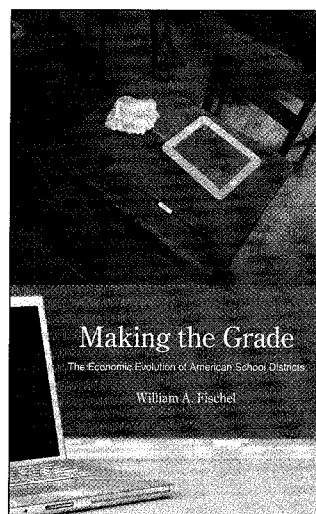
True enough, concedes Fischel, but why did people accept those particular changes while rejecting a host of recommendations from blue-ribbon commissions that we have long since forgotten? The conventional “top-down” history of American education is at best incomplete. Instead, Fischel

offers a “bottom-up” history that, with a few parsimonious concepts, explains quite a lot about the development of the American school system.

Two such concepts carry most of the burden. School systems have been structured to enhance homeowner property values while facilitating the build-up of place-based social capital. The first goal, enhancing property values, explains the evolution of the school system. The second, building place-based social capital, explains the system’s abiding resistance to reformers trying to change it. Fischel’s account is much more persuasive on the former than the latter.

How the drive to enhance property values shaped the development of schools is relatively straightforward and compelling. The Northwest Ordinance of 1784 and 1787 and the Land Act of 1785 set aside a portion of land in each township as an endowment for local schools. Like any modern property developer, the federal government understood that quality schools would help attract buyers and raise prices for the land it was trying to sell.

Given an agrarian society with poor transportation, schools could only draw enough students to populate one-room schoolhouses. With few students of the same age and with child labor on farms causing irregular attendance, the efficient arrangement was to group students by ability rather than age. But as transportation improved and demand for a high-school education increased,



the one-room schoolhouse organized into “recitation groups” no longer sufficed. School districts consolidated, creating enrollment areas large enough to support a high school. And schools enrolled enough pupils to form age-based grades, which could offer focused instruction in specific subjects and prepare students for high school.

These changes occurred, Fischel argues, not just because education luminaries recommended them, but because homeowners understood that modern schools would enhance property values. Schools became remarkably standardized, adopting a similar calendar and covering similar material in each grade so that new residents could move into an area with relatively little disruption to their children’s education. As with the adoption of the Microsoft operating system or VHS, communities accepted these near-universal standards and structures with no central authority imposing them. Local homeowners everywhere understood that they had to incorporate these changes to compete with other communities for new residents.

Schools are designed the way they are, Fischel suggests, because we want them that way. And they continue to be that way, despite the efforts of reformers, because people generally prefer the existing system. As he puts it, “Nobody loves local public schools but the people.”

What they love, in particular, is the place-based social capital that school

districts provide. Because schools enroll children according to where they live, they become a natural vehicle for people getting to know their neighbors. And knowing more neighbors enhances people's ability to work on issues of common concern with regard to municipal government. If students had access to vouchers, then more students would go to school in other neighborhoods and even other cities. We would not know as many of our neighbors and so would be less able to join forces to get the city to put in speed bumps or clean up the local park.

As proof of general resistance to school choice, Fischel references failed voucher ballot initiatives in California and Michigan. Leaving aside whether ballot initiatives are the best measure of popular support, Fischel has to explain the growing popularity of charter schools. He attempts to square that circle by claiming that "most administrative rules give preference to students who reside in the local district" for admission to charter schools, while vouchers generally lack place-based restrictions. Fischel goes so far as to say this distinction in residential restrictions between charters and vouchers is "critical" to the greater success of charters. "If charter schools were in practice open to all comers, the ability of a locale to benefit from their success would be limited, and so would local support for charter schools."

Unfortunately, the facts do not fit Fischel's story. Other than conversion charters and charter schools in a limited number of states, the bulk of charter schools place no residential requirements on admission. In California, for example, which has the most charter schools of any state, the law stipulates that "admission to a charter school shall not be determined according to the place of residence of the pupil..." In Texas, another important charter state, the law prohibits "discrimination in admission policy on the basis

of...the district the child would otherwise attend...." Conversely, many voucher programs, including those in Milwaukee, Cleveland, and Washington, D.C., offer vouchers only to residents of those districts to attend private schools within the district boundaries. Many proposed but unsuccessful voucher programs had similar geographic constraints.

If residential restrictions do not distinguish charters from vouchers, then something other than place-based social capital has to explain the greater relative success of charters. The obvious alternative explanation is that teachers unions are more threatened by vouchers than by charters, and their organized political power, not widespread preferences, has thwarted vouchers and stymied even charters.

But Fischel seems determined to avoid this sort of political or top-down explanation, so determined that he twists himself into an inaccurate explanation to preserve his bottom-up theory. The book would be much more compelling throughout if he offered his bottom-up theory for the development of school structures but conceded that, once created, those structures engender organized interest groups that make the structures inflexible to changing needs and potentially better ideas. Perhaps we have met the enemy and this time he isn't us: he's the teachers unions.

Jay P. Greene is professor of education reform at the University of Arkansas and a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute.

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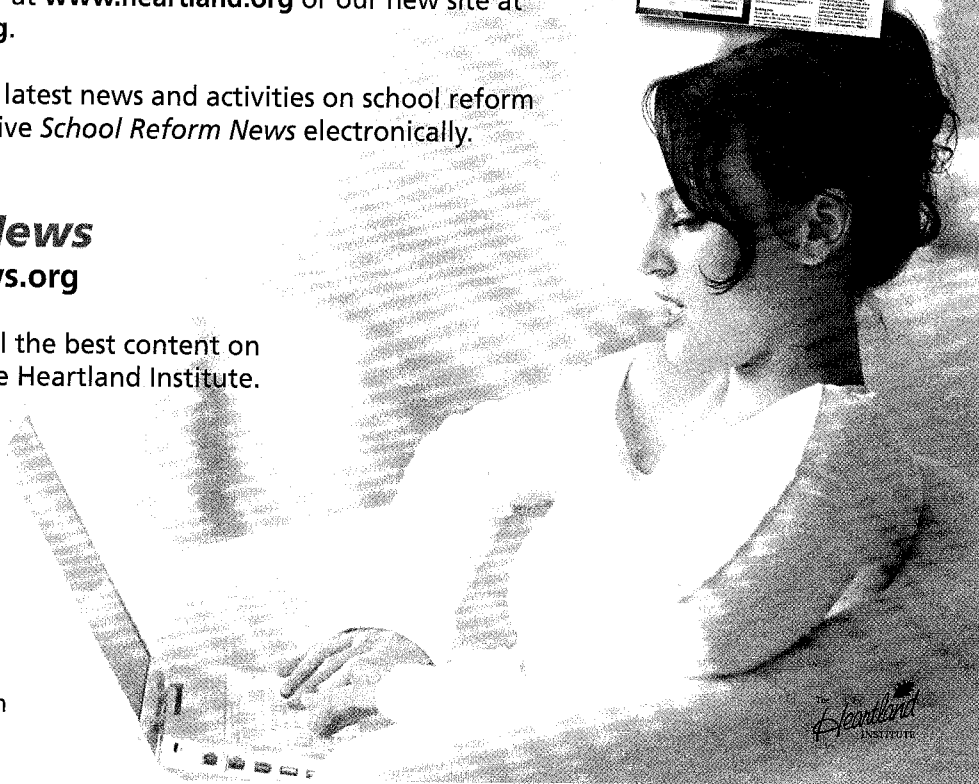
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SRNEDNEXT

Bye-Bye Blackboards

Interactive and expensive, whiteboards come to the classroom

BY MICHAEL J. PETRILLI

While
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self-directed
online learning
is all the rage,
here's a
technology that
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a given.

It's easy to ridicule "interactive whiteboards" and the schools that are rushing to buy them. Choose your analogy: it's like rearranging deck chairs on the *Titanic*, perfecting VHS in a Blu-ray world, or lemmings jumping over a cliff. For while individualized, self-directed online learning is all the rage, here's a technology that still takes whole-class instruction for a given, puts the teacher front and center, and offers not much more than a modern update to the age-old chalkboard.

These contraptions, which go by brand names like SMART Boards and Promethean ActivBoards and cost about \$5,000 a pop, are giant computerized screens that crackle with video, audio, and Internet connectivity. When hooked up to a computer, they enable teachers to present multimedia lessons meant to catch the eyes (and brains) of a generation addicted to Wii, iPhones, and IMing. They also serve as an old-fashioned blackboard (teachers and students write on them with special markers) but with a twist: whatever is scribbled on the board can be captured, digitized, and saved for later. This is particularly helpful for students who miss class and can in effect replay the lesson at their leisure. It also allows teachers to "rewind" and explain a point made 15 minutes or 15 days earlier.

But for the technorati and the pedagogical constructivists, this isn't nearly transformative enough. (Or, in Clay Christensen's words, "disruptive" enough.) As 6th-grade teacher (and edu-tech expert) Bill Ferriter recently asked in *Teacher Magazine*, "Do we really want to spend thousands of dollars on a tool that makes stand-and-deliver instruction easier? ... Why are we wasting money on interactive whiteboards—tools that do little to promote independent discovery and collaborative work?"

If there's common ground between "individualized learning" gurus and whiteboard fans, it might come in the form of

"learner response systems." These clickers allow all students in the class to answer a teacher's question at once. Their responses can be instantly aggregated and displayed on the whiteboard; teachers can look at their computer screens and know right away which of their students gave the wrong answer. It's "formative assessment" taken to the extreme, and allows a teacher to know which students need more explanation, and when the class is ready to move on. A non-experimental study conducted by Robert Marzano and funded by Promethean found positive results for 79 teachers who used the clickers in conjunction with the boards.

And it's not hard to understand why these things are spreading like kudzu. Karen Lockard is the principal of Bethesda-Chevy Chase (BCC) high school in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C.; Promethean boards are now installed in two-thirds of her school's classrooms. She

told me this fall, "I had a parent call me the week after school started and she said, 'My son can't learn in this classroom this year because his teacher had a Promethean board last year and now she doesn't. And now my kid can't learn.' I didn't ask her, what did he do the year before that when [the whiteboards] didn't exist?"

Of course, the golden age of the interactive whiteboard might soon come to an end, as the recession, the crash in property taxes, and competition from the baby boomers' retirement expenses take their toll on school budgets. But these technologies still might be worth the investment, if they allow teachers to be just as effective with a class of 30 students as a class of 20. (If they can keep students more engaged, why not?) With that sort of efficiency, the whiteboards will pay for themselves. Will the teachers unions go for that sort of deal? Or will they view it as too "disruptive"? ❖

Out of the Mainstream

Staying there isn't easy

By LYNNE BLUMBERG

I spoke recently with a teacher at an alternative public high school. His students had been kicked out of their neighborhood schools for fighting, truancy, and drug abuse, and his job was to remedy the students' behavior so they could return to their neighborhood schools. I wondered, what

happened to the alternative school I remembered from the 1970s? It seemed so different from the alternative schools of today.

Alternative East High School in Wyncote, Pennsylvania, was modeled after the famous Parkway alternative school in Philadelphia. From 1971 to 1983, Alternative East drew students from Philadelphia and the surrounding suburban school districts of Abington, Cheltenham, and Springfield. The principal, Gisha Berkowitz, took the job after first becoming known as an "active parent."

At Alternative East, students could create their own courses. As long as the course met college entry requirements, students could develop it, find a faculty member to teach it, and then advertise the class on a poster. If 15 students expressed interest, they could register for the course during master scheduling days held twice during the year. Students seldom sat in classrooms all day. Instead of looking at slides, for example, an art class piled into a van to visit local galleries.

Alternative East was continually evaluated and received positive reviews. Berkowitz carefully kept the budget from getting "out of balance." So why did the school close?

As is often the case, the answer at the time was money. In 1983, Abington's school board, in a 5-4 vote, withdrew the district's participation, forcing the school to close its doors. Nevertheless, minutes from board meetings praised Alternative East and its programs, which included production of a children's play at a local mall and learning activities in genetics. The board justified its decision by saying that district schools had "highly skilled, highly paid people, and we should be able to provide for the needs of these [students]."

The underlying causes were probably more deep-seated. Times had changed. When the school opened, according to Berkowitz, students were politically alienated by the Vietnam War, racial segregation, and traditional schooling. There was a passion for hands-on, personally relevant education.



PHOTO / COURTESY OF AUTHOR

**What happened
to the
alternative school
I remembered
from the 1970s?**

But by the 1980s, Berkowitz explained, the students at Alternative East were "less interested in exploring." The teachers weren't as enthusiastic either, and that sapped energy out of the school. "The political milieu has to be [there]—everything has to be 'right'...and unfortunately, [that] doesn't happen enough."

Even the storied Parkway Program, which in 1970 *Time* magazine called "the most interesting high school in the U.S. today," fell victim to the changing political climate. Parkway was known as the "school without walls," because students learned about journalism at local newspapers, auto mechanics at auto shops, and art from museum historians. I spoke with Dr. Leonard Finkelstein, the second director of Parkway, who said that as a concept, Parkway was "magnificent." But reality did not always match up to its promise. Some students thrived in the loosely structured environment, while it became a "free-for-all" for others.

Dr. James Lytle, Parkway's first principal, said that by the late 1970s and early 1980s the middle-class students angry at the system had disappeared. Parkway became a safe alternative to the neighborhood schools and had to recruit "very aggressively" to maintain a diverse student population.

In 1990, the district asked Ms. Odette Harris to become Parkway's principal. For more than 30 years, Harris had been the principal of William Penn, a large, traditional urban high school. Her style and Parkway's had little in common, and she remained principal long enough to alter most things alternative. As Ms. Catherine Blunt, Parkway's union representative at the time, put it, the school changed "because we were in the district."

As districts like Philadelphia seek to "turn around" their public schools, let's not forget the lesson of the lost alternative schools. Inventive programs, even when successful, are easily swept aside and replaced by standard fare.

Lynne Blumberg is an ESL and English instructor and freelance writer.

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